

His Little Bird

thewanderers'wanderingdaughter

Harry Potter

Complete



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Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. Sight
2. An Unexpected Guest
3. Taste
4. Sanctuary
5. Sound
6. Scent
7. Bird Watching
8. Touch
9. M
10. The Ball
11. Nightmare
12. Revelation
13. The New Year
14. Control
15. Lucius Malfoy
16. I'm Not Afraid of You
17. Something Wicked This Way Comes
18. The End Part One
19. The End Part Two
20. Epilogue

Summary

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Description:

Birds should be watched and not kept. But Draco never was one to obey rules. It's their sixth year. Draco still hates Hermione, but finds he's becoming obsessed with her. Really dark. Non-con situations.

1. Sight

All related to the world of Harry Potter belongs to JK Rowling. This plot is my idea.

Chapter One: Sight

Since first setting foot into Hogwarts, Hermione Granger had established herself as one of the brightest students in the whole lot, if not *the* brightest. Through countless hours spent in libraries and in classrooms she had worked really quite hard to put herself at the top, and through these rigorous practices and more, she held a secret sense of pride in herself and all her accomplishments. Harry and Ron often told her she spent too much time at the library, that now and then it wouldn't hurt to abandon her books temporarily and go socialize for a bit. She knew deep down she could be a bit awkward at times, and her attempts (the very few she had made so far, back in the Muggle world) at flirting or romance had turned out terribly.

I'd rather be in the library, anyway, she'd think, fighting off the embarrassment that had pricked at her after those incidents. She had been made fun of for her looks, for her eagerness to answer all the questions the professors gave. She didn't care for it, and would withdraw into her studies again.

That summer, there had been a boy that had caught her fancy in the library she frequented. He had dark hair and brown eyes, was around her height. He smiled at her every time she came in, and they had made small talk a few times as she had checked out books, her heart hammering all the while as she tried to appear calm and not blush. She had wandered the aisles and wondered again and again what might happen if she asked him out for a coffee.

Nothing had come of it. She'd never even gotten the chance. A letter had come from Hogwarts a week before her next planned visit. It was from Dumbledore, requesting her presence at the school a week before the term officially started. She'd immediately messaged Harry and Ron to ask if they'd received a letter, too. They had. None of them knew why but agreed to meet at King's Cross, where Dumbledore had arranged a Portkey for them so they might all arrive at once.

He had specified in his brief letter that he would not be there himself, but most of the staff would. When he arrived, he would greet them all properly and explain why they'd been summoned early. In the meantime, they were free to make themselves at home. That they had, she thought with a small smile as she stepped over a puddle on the cobblestoned floor. They had pored over a great number of books in the library-or at least she had. The boys had gazed out the window at the Quidditch field, longing evident in their eyes. They would have gone out to practice but the entire week they had been there it had been raining. Hard, relentless pouring accompanied by a symphony of thunderclaps and some spectacular shows of lightning as well. Not to mention the harsh winds. Harry and Ron would have no problem walking through the grounds but seeing as she was quite as physically strong as them, she'd have to put up a good resistance against it.

The weather had dampened their spirits, but they decided to hang about inside instead. Reading, exploring the empty classrooms, playing Wizards Chess and Exploding Snap and when the gloominess really got to them, they would sit at the Gryffindor Common Room fire over steaming mugs of tea (courtesy of the House Elves) they would talk about the approaching war, or try to devise strategies to take down Voldemort's growing regime.

So far we have nothing, she thought dimly as she turned 'round a corner.

But that mustn't make us lose our focus, she resolved as she reached her destination.

There it was, the portrait that led into the Head Boy and Head Girls' Common Room. Of course, she knew she was a shoo-in as Head Girl. She had kept track of all the other girls' marks in her year and none of theirs came within spitting distance of hers.

When it came to her grades Hermione was quite vain, to be honest. She worked hard for them. Her peers had made fun of her in the past over her extreme studiousness but that didn't matter to her as long as she had her goals in mind and achieved them.

She was sure Dumbledore had called her here early to tell her she would be Head Girl. As for Harry and Ron, she wasn't sure. Perhaps he thought she might get bored being alone for a week with no one else to talk to, but as long as she had access to the library she didn't want for much else. Perhaps either of them had been chosen as Head Boy? She made a face. Close friends they might all be, but Hermione knew for a fact their grades were not up to par.

Well, that's their own doing, though I've tried to help them all this time.

Hermione could feel it, this was *her* room. Put her hand on the picture of the beautiful night scenery and *ah*, it felt so right. No one had worked as hard as she to gain the position. She knew she'd do a good job-the only problem was who she'd be working with. She had no idea who the boy with the highest marks was.

A small crease appeared between her brows. She knew Neville had made an astounding improvement in his classes except for Potions, unfortunately). There was that boy in Hufflepuff who she heard had good marks, but she wasn't sure if he'd graduated or not. A niggling suspicion crawled up her spine; she realized with a jolt Malfoy had good grades as well. Or at least only in Potions, as far as she was aware. No matter. She doubted it would be him, anyway. He had never seemed the overly studious sort, and she rarely saw him in the library, at that. No, it had to be someone else.

With a last, longing look at the portrait she turned, her long brown curls swishing heavily over her shoulder and left towards the Great Hall. It was nearly suppertime, and Professor Dumbledore was due to arrive today.

Hermione entered the Great Hall, immediately spotting her best friends at the Gryffindor table.

"Ermione! Where 'ave 'ou been?" Ron asked around a large mouthful of steak. Harry looked up from his plate, flashing a grin at Hermione, who smiled back and crinkled her nose at Ron.

"I've been walking around, reflecting on things." She replied with a vague wave of her hand. "Ronald, I really don't want to see what's in your mouth. Honestly!" Even as she scolded him, she couldn't help but smile as she sat next to Harry. Ron looked apologetic as he heaped some steak onto his plate and struggled to swallow. Harry laughed and turned to Hermione.

"Reflecting on what?" he inquired. "Is it about the Head Boy again?"

Hermione nodded as she began to fill her plate. Harry shook his head, placing his hand on her shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze.

"Don't stress out about it, whoever it is, I'm sure he'll be great."

And with that, he returned his attention to his pie. Hermione scanned the staff table as she ate some lentil soup. Professor McGonagall was in a conversation with Professor Sprout and Hagrid, who caught her eye and waved. She smiled and waved back, and turned back to her soup. Harry and Ron were now devouring their deserts while maintaining an ongoing debate on which Quidditch team was better. Shaking her head, Hermione stared at her plate. Suddenly she felt very nervous. Ron had noticed and was about to ask her what was wrong when an owl swooped in and dropped a small note at Hermione's plate.

"Who's it from?" He pointed at the note.

Hermione opened it. Scanning its contents, she replied, "It's from Dumbledore. He wants to speak to me about the Head Girl position."

She smiled. She'd been right.

Rushing out of her seat, she almost tripped over the bench. She called out a hasty good-by and set on her way to the Headmasters' office, smiling to herself. A light bounce in her step, she ascended the main entrance stairs that led to the second floor. The torches lined against the wall cast a soft glow on the ancient statues and suits of armor that inhabited the halls of Hogwarts.

The large, swollen passageways normally held hundreds of students as they swarmed to get to their next class but on this night, they only held the brilliant, formidable witch as she navigated to her destination.

Or was it really only her?

The fine hairs on her arms suddenly stood at ends and her skin prickled. Someone was watching her.

She was a bit nervous to look around-suddenly she recalled the very unpleasant memory of facing the Basilisk through her reflection in second year. She had been prepared for it, but it hadn't lessened the ugly shock of finding it near her. She forced herself to turn anyway despite the fear, knowing the Basilisk was long gone, sweeping those intelligent eyes around the empty space before her. There was nothing. Didn't mean there wasn't anyone there, though. Hogwarts was always full of surprises, and there were plenty of large objects one could hide behind around her.

"Who's there?" She called out. Silence rang in her ears. She turned and eyed the space around her warily before moving on. The sensation had gone, and she needed to get on her

way anyway.

If there was another thing she prided herself on, it was her punctuality. She was never late and didn't intend to start now. She shook the last few moments away mentally and walked on.

Draco Malfoy had just arrived at Hogwarts, peeling off his rain-sodden clothing and changing into a fresh pair of robes. That damned rain. It had rained all this past week, holing him up inside his Manor. He'd been fine with it for the first day or two, but after the third day, his body had been screaming for action. He played Quidditch daily just by himself. He'd fly around his home, chasing after the Snitch his father had bought him in his second year at Hogwarts. But it had rained and it had rained hard, just as much as it was still raining now. His mother had prohibited him from taking one step outside, fearing for his safety. And then the Headmaster had requested him to come a few days early to Hogwarts on undisclosed business-he'd been secretly happy to get away from his home. He had been sent to King's Cross where a Portkey had waited for him, but it had only been able to take him as far as the school gates where he had been received by the sour-faced Filch, who seemed to be secretly pleased that the Malfoy boy in all his fine clothing was wet to the bone and very cross indeed.

He'd entered the Slytherin Common Room and went to the boy's dorms, not bothering to unpack his trunks; he would be moving into the Head Dorm anyway, so what was the point? Anyone might have laughed at his presumption, but for what other reason could he have been called in so early? If he was in trouble, they'd have sent the letter and begun an inquiry, or Dumbledore would have visited the Malfoy Manor himself. Draco knew his marks had been at their best in the last two years-he had not aimed to do so, but company had been lacking lately (i.e, he had finally shed the obnoxious, dull weight of Crabbe and Goyle) and he liked to challenge himself.

Draco had been just about to summon a House Elf for a cup of tea when the note had arrived at his window. The silly owl outside his window was drenched; as soon as he'd untied the paper it had slogged off in a watery flight to the Owlery. The note was from Dumbledore, requesting his presence in his office shortly. Groaning, Draco threw the note into the fire where it landed with a loud pop and a sizzle. He slipped on his shoes and went on his way.

There was no doubt as to whom the Head Girl would be. Who else but Granger? No other girl at this school studied as hard or performed as well as she did. Grudges and dislikes aside, he had to give credit where credit was due. The witch was dedicated-doggedly so, to become the world's biggest smartass. Countless times he'd shove past her in the library, her pert nose buried in another ancient tome. How many times had she beaten him for top marks in their exams, even by a mere few points? Give her any question and no matter the difficulty she would rattle off an answer. He found himself wondering, sometimes, just what it would take to stump her.

He suddenly remembered with a small grimace an incident in his first year at Hogwarts. His father had paid a surprise visit in December to check on him. He'd snuck into one of his classes, where Granger had answered every question at lightning speed and had earned her house a boatload of points for performing a simple charm correctly. He hadn't noticed his father standing just in front of the door, barely visible, watching the girl with a bright glint in his eye and an amused smile.

After that class, his father had pulled him aside, to his immense surprise. They had walked into an empty classroom, his father inquiring about his classes and grades. Draco had answered politely, talking positively about his classes, albeit in a bored tone.

His father had his back turned to him, facing a chart on the wall depicting a list of poisons. Malfoy had sat there at a desk, wondering if the interview was over when his father turned around suddenly.

"Tell me, son, who was that girl in your class? The one with the strange hair who answered every question."

Draco frowned. "Granger?"

His father frowned slightly. "Is that her name? How... unusual."

"No, it's Hermione." Her first name sounded alien and strange on his tongue. He'd never said it before. "Hermione Granger."

His father had repeated her name, sounding out the syllables and vowels like he was reading it from a dictionary. Draco had thought this very odd. "Her-mi-o-ne Granger. Tell me, Draco. What is this girl like?"

Draco had found this an odd question but hastened to reply. "She's rather intelligent, I suppose. Always with her nose in a book. She practically lives in the library. She always beats me in every exam, and she's very bossy. She talks a lot, too. Always prattling on about something or another just to show off."

His father had listened very keenly, looking at Draco with an odd look on his face. "You don't like her then," he said flatly. Draco had almost jumped out of his seat with shock and rage.

"Like her? Why on earth would I *like* her? Big teeth and horrible hair, she never stops bossing people around and thinks she's better than everyone. Always prancing about with Potter and Weasley and they never get in trouble. They have all the Professors wrapped around their fingers."

His father had turned back to the wall. "A Gryffindor then? And is friends with the Potter boy. Interesting indeed..."

Draco, who had recovered his breath from his rant, added, "She's Muggleborn, too."

That certainly had caught his father's attention. He'd stopped his musings, real disappointment showing on his handsome, regal face.

"A Muggleborn? Are you sure?" Draco nodded, confused. His father cast a mysterious look at the door, where students were still passing by outside to their classes. "What a pity. Such a good prospect, too."

By this point, young Draco had been confused. What was his father going on about?

"Candidate for what, father?"

His father had looked at him as if surprised.

“Why, my boy, surely you must know! The future Lady Malfoy is somewhere in this castle! Such a shame Miss Granger is Mudblood, such a shame. She’ll be quite a beauty in a few years’ time, and intelligence in a Malfoy Lady is a must, son. Don’t go after the brainless ones. The smart ones give more of a challenge.” He clapped his son on the shoulder and swept from the room, and an eleven year old Draco Malfoy had stood in the empty Transfiguration classroom, shivering with disgust at the thought of marrying Granger, and marriage in general.

Back in the present and still grimacing, Draco rose up the stairs from the dungeons where the Slytherin Common Room was hidden. Lost in his thoughts, he’d continued onward until he heard the sound of determined footsteps coming his way. Immediately, almost like a sixth sense, he knew who those footsteps belonged to so he hid behind a thick pillar and scanned his eyes along the corridor until he found her and resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Granger.

Her lips were curved upwards the tiniest bit; those damned brown curls were cascading down her back and shoulders, swaying gently as she walked. That pale face shone in the shadows and light cast by the torches on the walls. Her muggle attire caught his attention and irritated him until he remembered he was wearing muggle clothing as well, but at least his were hidden under his robes. He knew when she suddenly sensed him. She turned around, calling out to whoever was there, grasping her wand, slight discomfort etched into her face. He found the situation they were in ripe for a prank, she not knowing he was there. He would have stayed to toss her a hex or two maybe cast a Disillusionment charm over himself and frighten her a bit, but he had matters to attend to. When she finally walked off, he waited a minute, then resumed walking, trying not to walk too quickly so he wouldn’t end up walking with her to the Headmaster’s office-but having long legs and being a fast walker by habit, it happened anyway.

He resolved not to be too annoyed over it-if he was to work with Granger for the entirety of the school year, then he might as well begin the exposure now. Even if he didn’t like it. Besides, walking too slowly wouldn’t do-she was bound to reach the office before him, and if he entered a minute later he’d be perceived as late, even if he was on time.

Draco Malfoy was a bully. He was the son of a Death Eater and lazy, sometimes. He was a smartass and sharp-tongued and admittedly quick-tempered, but one thing he could not stand to be, after numerous lectures from his mother in his childhood, was late.

2. An Unexpected Guest

Hermione skidded to a stop, having slipped on a peculiarly slimy puddle. In trying to step over it, she had overreached and her foot had caught in the substance anyway, sliding about five inches and threatening to spill her onto the ground, face-front. By some stroke of luck, she had caught herself in time, and edged away from the puddle, scraping the bottom of her shoe against the cobblestone, then cleaned the rest of it off with her wand.

She sighed and leaned against the wall briefly. The entrance to Dumbledore's office was just a few doors down. It would have been extremely embarrassing to have fallen just outside of it-had anyone seen, they would have laughed and thought she had all but raced there to collect her badge. She straightened her skirt and with a huff, turned on her heel, walking straight into something very solid in the process.

"Oof—"

Distantly, she heard a surprised grunt.

"What the fuck—" she heard someone say.

Her first thought was that she had walked straight into the wall. Her body jerked backward, overcorrecting itself and she began to topple over. She reached blindly in a panic with both hands, grasping at whatever was in front of her so she wouldn't fall.

Where did that come from?

Whatever-*whoever*-she had just grabbed at had moved with her and for two terrifying seconds, they wobbled and almost fell over in a heap, but managed to right themselves quickly enough to avoid it.

It was someone's chest, she realized with a jolt, a male, she could tell, from the lack of...

In another panicked move, she regained her footing and snatched her hands away, the skin on her face a red, flaming mess. The fabric she had held onto was expensive, no doubt, it felt soft and silky under her touch. A relieved, awkward laugh pushed at her lips. Her blush stung with its intensity. She looked up, ready to apologize, and balked.

"I know I'm handsome, Granger, but that doesn't give you the right to grope me however you like, you know," Draco Malfoy said, dusting off the front of his robes as if she had dirtied them. He raised a brow. "By the way, watch where you're going, won't you?"

"Don't presume, Malfoy, I tripped and you know it. The day I voluntarily put my hands on you will be the day flobberworms grow wings." Hermione shot back.

Perhaps this wasn't the right time to argue, being just outside the Headmaster's door and all, but it was hard to resist when he was such an arse. Most times she managed to stay level-headed and ignore him. The embarrassment of this incident, and his having seen the whole thing, made it difficult for this occasion. It stung at her pride. Just a bit.

He only smiled condescendingly. "Is that so? Well judging by the way you refused to let go of me, that day might not be so far off."

She glared. "Don't overcomplicate it. I didn't want to fall."

"She says unconvincingly, as she blushes."

That only made her redder. She fought the urge to hide her face with her palms.

"Get out of my way and let me pass."

He crossed his arms. His smile grew broader.

"I sense you're in a hurry."

"Oh, *good* observation! What gave me away?"

"Your lack of manners, for one," he said haughtily. "You almost knocked me over. I could have been injured, and I've had no apology from you yet."

Hermione raised one eyebrow. "*Were* you injured?"

He gestured to his chest. "Aside from the frankly lewd way you groped me, no."

"I did not *grope* you!" She was blushing again. He laughed.

"Look at you, red as can be. You're very entertaining when you're embarrassed, Granger."

She crossed her arms. "Are you finished having your fun?"

"I could keep going, Granger. How much redder can you get? I'm curious. Also, you still haven't given me your apology."

"Oh, like you really care."

"You're right," he said. "I'll accept that silly blush as one. It's good enough to watch you squirm."

She glared at him. "Will you let me pass or will I have to make you?"

"Don't play at threats, Granger," he had suddenly shifted in attitude, from amusement to grave seriousness. "Don't make me laugh."

"You were laughing when I punched you."

She needed no further context; they both knew exactly the moment she referred to. His eyes turned glacial.

"I won't apologize for that," she said. "You deserved it, and I enjoyed it."

"I didn't want your apology," he said coldly. The corner of his lip lifted-sneer or smile? Hermione wished she knew what it meant.

When he said nothing in reply she walked past him a few steps and he let her, but before she'd even got far he spoke again, forcing her to turn.

"You're Head Girl, of course."

She looked at him suspiciously.

“Yes. Obviously,” she added, as an extra dig.

Did you really think it would be anyone else?

He had not looked away from her. Hermione fought not to back away. He nodded, breaking eye contact at last to look to the side as if in resignation, but his jaw was tight and his eyes still angry. Had he been hoping it wouldn't be her? She could believe it. He was vain enough to believe things would go his way.

“Let's get this over with, then.”

Without warning he moved forward, and instead of walking around her, he walked directly into her instead, knocking her hard with his shoulder and she, not having expected it, was pushed into the wall abruptly, narrowly missing striking her head against it.

He said not a word, didn't even look back. Hermione couldn't believe the pettiness of the act. Her left arm smarted with pain. He had reached the large golden statuette of an eagle that guarded the stairway to Dumbledore's office.

Unbelievable—

Before he could utter the first syllable to the password, Malfoy's head snapped back, his right cheek on fire. Hand on his cheek, he looked incredulously to where the angry witch stood before him, nostrils flared, fire in her eyes. The hand that had struck him was still in the air. He didn't think he'd ever seen her that angry. It was oddly exhilarating, but he almost didn't feel that rush under the anger that had flared within him in response to hers.

Jabbing her finger into his chest, she hissed, “You pompous arse! There's plenty of room in this corridor for you to walk around!”

If Hermione had noticed the murderous glint in his eyes she might have lowered her voice and halted her assault but no. No. She was furious. She didn't even notice when he whipped out his wand and with his other hand, caught her wrists until the fact that she couldn't move her arms hit her and she looked up, scowling.

Before she knew it, she'd been slammed into the cold, damp wall. Hissing in pain, she struggled to free herself from his grasp.

“Let go-!” She couldn't finish her sentence. Malfoy's wand was digging into her throat. She could feel the tip begin to heat up, burning her skin and she had to bite back a pained cry. She'd expected yelling, threats, even a jinx or two, but not this. He was holding her arms above her, pinned to the cold stone with one hand, pressing his body into hers against the wall, preventing escape.

There were his eyes, cold and hateful, boring into her and his full lips curled into a sneer so close to her face. His hands were digging into her wrists painfully but she refused to cry out.

He looked at her in those few seconds, and distantly realized how his father had been right. Granger had transformed. The first obvious sign was in Fourth Year, the moment she'd walked into the room and had stunned everyone, including him. The bushy hair had been tamed and now become a soft mass of gentle curls and waves. Those beaver's teeth he had teased her relentlessly about were not so large anymore; he could easily tell by the way she had just bared them at him. Their bodies were nearly pressed together; he chanced a look down, his cool eyes slowly taking in the curves that were not hidden by her bulky robe, which had unclasped. He supposed in all these past years he'd only looked at her in passing, in ire, never really taking the time to notice her appearance. The Yule Ball had been a one-off. The next day, she had returned to normal and everyone had promptly forgotten her brief transformation. It must have been a very gradual change for him never to really see it until now. She was more appealing than he cared to admit, and was shocked the thought had formed inside his own head.

His eyes darted back up to meet hers. There was intense dislike mingled with the tiniest bit of fear in her eyes. She had noticed his appraisal. Pale cheeks burned with the intensity of her blush from his close scrutiny. The anger sparked in her eyes, wrinkling her brow, and he caught himself thinking just how much more attractive she was in her anger.

Like some wild thing.

She had always seemed so full of poise and calm. This was a side of her he had only seen once in such proximity. Perhaps all that had been an illusion.

How interesting.

However, pretty as she was, she was still a Mudblood, and that could not be ignored or forgiven. He had never been this close to her or even touched her before and at the same time his skin wanted to crawl, he found it wasn't unpleasant at all, which annoyed him a lot. This little bitch was the bane of his existence, along with Potter and Weasley. He itched to hex her, maybe even push her around a bit. Give her a good fright. She needed to learn her place. How dare a Mudblood think she could scold him, as if he were a child to be reprimanded?

"What are you staring for?" she snapped, finding her voice at last. "Let me go!"

She wriggled in his grasp, wincing against the tip of his wand which still dug into her white throat. Her body brushed against his and while she, in her haste to be free didn't notice, he did and discovered quite grumpily that he rather liked the sensation. But that was it. This was as far as it would go. He was not to be subject to another horrible realization today. Oblivious to his internal struggles, she wriggled again, trying to yank her wrists out of his hold, trying to kick him though it was hard. Thanks to their proximity, he could feel her wand in her front robe pocket and knew she would reach for it if he let her. That she was trying was evident-he could feel the strain of her muscles as she tried to break from his grip, but he was stronger and would not budge.

For all her bravado, however, she jumped and ceased all struggles when he slammed his palm against the cold wall, inches away from her head. She flinched. He leaned in close and she regarded him with wary eyes, pressing herself back into the wall.

"Do not touch me, Granger. Do you understand?"

Still scowling, she did not answer his demand. Her eyes were narrowed, jaw set firmly, but he could sense the unease radiating through her. Satisfaction and something unwholesome roared within him. This sort of pleasure was not the sort he was used to concerning her. For Merlin's sake, this was *Granger* he was thinking of. Holding her angry gaze for a while longer, he let her go without warning, watching as she stumbled and grabbed her wand at once, stepping away from him.

"You're Head Boy." She said in an accusing tone, rubbing her wrists.

"Obviously," he said, parroting her snark. "How long did that take you?"

"I never pictured you as a great student, but I never pictured you as a savage, either," she said coldly. "That sort of behavior will cost you the position. I'll make sure of it."

"Will you, now?" He recited the password to the gargoyle guarding the entrance with a roll of his eyes. "Bertie Botts'." He swept into the little passage room as the gargoyle leaped aside and began to climb up the stairs leading into the Headmasters' office. He heard footsteps behind him and turned around.

"If you want an apology you won't get it. I acted foolishly, but so did you. We're both in the wrong here. Is that good enough for you?"

"It's a start." She walked past him and began climbing the stairs. He was right. She shouldn't have slapped him. He had started it, but she'd escalated it with that brilliant move. They were both wrong. But if he wouldn't apologize, then neither would she. If he expected her to let him walk all over her, he was wrong.

"Of course, if this is already too much for you, feel free to decline the position," he said from behind her.

"I've dealt with worse. Besides, someone's got to keep you in check, after all." She rubbed at her wrists resentfully. "You for a roommate. How lucky."

Malfoy seemed to abhor the idea as much as she. "If I'd known I would have been picked along with you, believe me, I'd have failed everything on purpose."

She paused and looked back to face him. "For all you know there's still time. Nothing is stopping *you* from declining."

"No," he said, giving her a strange smile. "I'll stay on. I know how angry this makes you. You were right. I do enjoy it."

They had reached the top landing. A wide door met them. Hermione reached up to knock.

The door opened before she could answer. They entered the room. Hermione decided to let her anger rest and walked inside, feeling Malfoy behind her. She stared in awe around the room-she had been in here a few times before but it never failed to impress her. Crowded around several shelves lining the walls were both magical and muggle items, several of which she recognized, others she had no idea what they were.

Fawkes gave a soft, lovely cry at their entrance. She went to him immediately and stroked his feathers. The phoenix nuzzled her hand, and she smiled.

Professor Dumbledore had stood from his desk and shaken Malfoy's hand and now shook Hermione's with a warm smile.

"Welcome back, Hermione, Draco. Please take a seat. I hope you both arrived safely and without trouble."

"Yes, Professor," Malfoy said, cutting over Hermione, who'd also begun to speak.

"I am glad to hear it." The wizened Headmaster sat at his desk and joined his hands to form a steeple. "You both received a letter about a week ago, and know why you are here."

They both nodded. Dumbledore smiled, and a gleaming gold badge appeared in front of each of the students sitting on the other side of the desk.

"I hope this is a happy occasion for both of you. You have excelled and earned this position, and will represent your Houses as exemplary students."

He paused.

"It is no secret there is an unsavory history between the two of you and your acquaintances." He peered at them studiously over the rims of his spectacles. "I am hoping, however, that these differences can be resolved, or even set aside in the hope of achieving unity and setting an example for the rest of the school. Does that seem fair?"

Neither student appeared enthusiastic.

"...Yes, Professor."

Satisfied, the Headmaster reached into a crystal bowl of candies on his desk and popped one into his mouth. He gestured for them to follow suit. Neither moved.

"Your duties will encourage communication and teamwork, as well as spending time together."

"What if we prefer working alone, sir?"

Dumbledore nodded as if he'd expected Malfoy to bring that up.

"You may do so outside any Head Boy duties. When the occasion calls, however, I expect both of you to work as one. Understood?"

Malfoy looked highly displeased.

"Perfectly."

"Now, in normal circumstances, we do not ask the Head students to come before the term begins," Dumbledore said, picking through the assortment of jelly beans in his palm. "These are special circumstances, I believe. I have called the two of you here in advance to test the waters, to put it lightly, and see how well you get along and perhaps let old grievances die in order to work better together. I am sure this can be achieved with enough commitment and trial. If, however, this poses too much of a challenge, and a change needs to be made, I request to be informed of this by the end of the first week of term."

Hermione stole a glance at Malfoy. His face was blank. Clearly, Dumbledore was referring to Malfoy. He knew it, too, and his jaw was tight with anger.

"We will try our best, Professor," she said.

"Thank you for the opportunity, sir," Malfoy said, his voice as expressionless as his face.

"Excellent, excellent." Dumbledore stood, went and offered a treat to Fawkes, who seemed a little wary of the bright green jellybean. Dumbledore chuckled and put it back in his pocket.

"I know this will not be easy for you," he said to the two students. "It may take time for you to become used to the arrangement, but I have faith my two brightest students will find a way to make it work."

"Here's hoping, sir," Hermione muttered.

"The two of you are very likely to learn from each other. I believe the exposure may benefit you both."

"That's unlikely," Malfoy said snidely as Dumbledore escorted them to the door.

"Do not be so sure so soon, Draco," Dumbledore said, smiling. "But if any problems do arise, I request that I be informed. We shall work through this together."

Hermione could feel Malfoy's unspoken reply as they left the office.

Like hell, we will.

The crackling noise of the fire lulled Harry into a peaceful state, allowing him to set his mind on the current task at hand. So peaceful, in fact, that he kept catching himself falling asleep. Perhaps not so focused after all.

Ron, on the other hand, was serious and alert, staring at the Wizard's chessboard as if he meant to set it on fire under his intense gaze. He issued a command to his knight, who walked across the board and smashed Harry's queen.

"Checkmate." Ron grinned, easing back into his chair. Harry scowled.

"Fancy another go?" Ron began to set up all the pieces again, ignoring Harry's half-hearted protests. This would be their fourth match. He'd beaten Harry in every single one.

He was about to make his first move when a loud slam made them jump. Turning around, he nearly fell when he saw Hermione stalk into the Common Room, brows furrowed in dissatisfaction. She stopped in front of them and sat down, letting out a huge frustrated breath.

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance. "What is it?"

She pushed her hair away from her face, eyes serious and ruminating.

"Malfoy has been chosen as Head Boy."

"You're pulling my leg." Ron stood from his seat. "Really?"

"He didn't pull any strings if that's what you're wondering. Won the position fair and square. I should have known, really. We usually get the same grades in everything. *Merlin.*

I'm supposed to live in the same dorm with Malfoy for the next two years!" she ground out, her eyes narrowed into furious slits.

Harry, over the shock, reached out and gently grasped her shoulder.

"Hermione, you don't have to do it if you don't want to. Malfoy's probably going to make it hell for you. Just request to dorm somewhere else?" Hermione, who had placed her head in her hands, shook her head, curls bouncing.

"I did, Harry. Dumbledore said no, that we need to show House Unity and try to work together, things like that. And Malfoy already is making it hell, he pushed me into the wall earlier," she griped, and then realized her error. They looked at her wrists, seeing the forming bruises, and everything went still.

"Looks like he did more than that," Harry said quietly.

"It's fine," she said quickly. Ron was standing from his chair.

"Fine? He gave you bruises!"

"And I slapped him, and it's over now," she insisted. "Really."

Harry shook his head. "Foul git." He looked at Hermione more closely. "How did that even come about?"

"He was angry at the thought of having to work with me, so like the 'exemplary student' he is, he pushed past me and I got knocked against the wall. It's *fine*, Ron."

"And then you slapped him?"

She winced. "I meant to just tell him off, but I couldn't help it. He was being such an arse."

"No doubt there," Harry said. "He deserved it."

"I think he's just trying to frighten me out of the position," she replied. "He'll stop once he sees I won't."

"That doesn't surprise me," Harry said, shaking his head.

"We could go hex him if you like," Ron said, his wand already in his hand. "Get a bit of payback."

"And get detentions before the term even starts? No! He isn't worth it."

"I'd say it's worth it, just to see the look on his face," Ron muttered.

"And as satisfying as that would be, we told Dumbledore we'd try our best to get along."

"And how's that going so far?" Harry asked. She scowled.

"We may not have gotten off on the right foot, but I'll talk to him when I get back. I'm willing to make an effort if he meets me halfway."

"And if not?"

"Then we go to Dumbledore and Malfoy gets replaced," she said. "Easy as that. Once Malfoy realizes he won't get his way, I think he'll have had enough and will just give it up on his own."

Harry made a face. "I don't know. He's stubborn."

"It doesn't hurt to *try*, Harry. We were both in the wrong, earlier. I won't forgive him for it, but I'm not innocent either in what happened."

The conversation drifted away from Malfoy after that, and for the next hour, they lounged about until Hermione had had enough and decided she wanted to sleep. Harry and Ron offered to walk her to her dorm and she accepted.

"Can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm so bored here with nothing to do that I actually can't wait for classes to start," Ron said unhappily as they neared the Head students dorm.

"Does this mean you'll finally commit to your studies?" Hermione was asking, as the entrance swung open and Malfoy stepped out.

Everyone paused.

Malfoy took one step outside. The door swung shut behind him.

Potter and Weasley's faces looked a tad more hostile than usual.

So she tattled.

"I assume you're here to defend her honor or some tripe like that," he said drily.

"Didn't think you had it in you to hurt a girl," Ron said.

Malfoy smirked and looked at Hermione. "Did you tell them how *you* hit me first?"

"Yes," she said, each hand clamped on an arm from both her friends, sensing a possible fight brewing. "Now if we're going to work together without tearing out each other's throats, we'll drop it, and act responsibly from now on. Agreed?"

He laughed. "Agreed. You should have got that down in writing."

"I don't have a quill on me," she said, "but I'll hold you to it."

"And I you," he said seriously. "I don't care to be slapped every time you feel slighted."

"Touch her again and we'll be waiting here for you," Harry said.

Malfoy turned to give Hermione a loathsome look. "As if I'd want to."

He turned back to Potter and Weasley. "I appreciate the welcome, but you are blocking the hallway, and I've had enough of this social visit. Step out of my way and we'll all end our night happily."

After a begrudging pause, Weasley moved, and Draco sauntered past.

He heard them speaking quietly behind him and knew they were talking badly of him. He didn't care and walked on in the direction of the kitchens. All this Granger business had left him hungry and irritable.

When he returned to the dorm, he had expected it to be dark and for Granger to be in her room, but found her on the couch instead, half-asleep, a book in her lap.

"Most people sleep in beds," he said as he made his way to his door. Hers was on the right, exactly opposite his on the far side of the common room.

"We need to talk about how we're going to get through this," she replied.

"Save it for tomorrow," he said dismissively. "I'm exhausted, and you clearly are, too."

"Will you at least try to make this work? I need to know."

He paused. "Yes. I can try. But we need to set rules if we're going to proceed."

She opened her mouth, looking pensive. He cut her off.

"*Tomorrow*, damnit. Any other day. Not now. But in case it needs saying, because you have that hopeful look in your eye: We are *not* going to become bosom friends. I don't care for you at all, and despite our Headmaster's hearty suggestions, I have no intention of knowing you better than I do now. Civil treatment is what you get, and civil treatment is what I will expect from you. Goodnight."

He shut himself into his room.

Hermione shook her head and went into her room as well. She had been a fool to entertain the thought that perhaps, seeing as they would be seeing a lot of each other from that moment on, they could agree to tone down the hostility, and perhaps learn to cope with each other. 'Civil' wasn't so bad, perhaps, but she was positive their understanding of the word varied quite a bit.

This was what she had to expect for the next two years. Despite her resolve, she felt a sense of regret and wondered if perhaps peace would be attainable at all working alongside Malfoy, but she knew it was too much to ask for. Did Dumbledore know what he was doing, placing them together like this? Nothing good would come of it.

She sighed and tried to sleep, foreboding tangling itself into her dreams.

3. Taste

Draco stretched on the couch he was lying in, watching the rain slide slowly down the window panes, bored. The first day of classes had ended with an uneventful dinner. He had been bored throughout and not much in the mood for talking. Crabbe and Goyle were still silent and sulking at the fact that he no longer needed or spoke to them. Pansy and Blaise hadn't been there, they'd been given detentions already for being caught in a rather compromising position in the boys' lavatory. Theodore Nott had tried striking up a conversation but Draco had barely replied so the other had given up and focused on eating.

By some stroke of luck, he had been assigned no homework for that first day and he'd finished unpacking all his things days ago, so he had time to waste away as he pleased. Fancying a nap, he'd come straight to the dorm after dinner. He had seen Granger walking off toward the library after dinner, scribbling in her planner, bumping into other classmates along the way and hardly noticing. The common room was warm and he hadn't felt like going all the way to his room so he'd settled for the couch near the fireplace and had slept a little until he heard the door opening and straightened up, not wanting to look like a slob just lying there.

Granger nodded silently in greeting and he nodded back, watching as she crossed the space to go into her room, leaving the door open. He could hear her rummaging around in her trunk and she came out a moment later, her arms laden with a pile of books. She went to the bookcase standing beside the couch he occupied and began settling her books neatly and in alphabetical order on the middle shelf. He had already placed some of his own on the tallest shelf. She realized that a second later and paused, her hand still poised in the air to push in another book. She looked at him.

"You don't mind, do you?"

He blinked lazily. "Why would I mind?"

"In case you wanted to add more of your own and wanted this shelf."

"Those are the only books I brought," he said. "Fill the whole thing if you like, I don't care."

She turned back to the shelves and resumed arranging her books.

"We've got patrol duty tonight," she said. "Did you get the missive?"

"Yes," he said, bored. "If you're not here on time I'll begin without you and you'll have to come find me."

"I'll be on time," she said confidently, sliding the last book into place and went back into her room, emerging a moment later with another heavy load of books.

He eyed the growing collection in the bookshelf. How could only imagine how many more she might have in her home. The mental image was almost daunting. Did she ever step outside?

“Surely you must have hobbies outside of reading.”

“I do. But I also really like books.”

“You don’t say.”

Thunder rumbled outside.

“And what are yours, then?” She asked.

“Quidditch. And bothering you, apparently.”

“I’m honored,” she said flatly. She placed a rather heavy book into its place.

“Your local bookshops must love you,” he remarked.

She did something that was stuck between a smile and a grimace and didn’t reply, going back into her room. He heard her moving things around and looked back to the window, scratching absently at his arm.

The extra week Dumbledore had given them had faded into nothing but disappointment for neither of them. The first day they’d avoided each other and nary a word was spoken between them. She was gone to the library or with her friends much of the time and he either stayed in his room or took walks around the campus when the weather permitted. Both of them had spent so little time in the dorm that he had already frightened her a number of times when entering the common room, since they weren’t often in it at the same time. He could tell she thought he did it on purpose, as if he waited all day just for the right moment to give her a proper fight like he had nothing more important to do. She gave him a withering glare every time and he didn’t bother to explain himself, knowing she wouldn’t believe him anyway. Let her think what she wanted. He didn’t care. When they spoke, their conversations were curt and brief, but they so far had adhered to their rule of civility, and that was all that mattered, although he felt that eventually, the long and stiff stretches of silence that lapsed between them would drive him out of his mind.

Some conversation must be had now and then. He was used to the dim ambience and chatter of the Slytherin common room, the boisterous noise at dinner, and coming back to an empty and silent dorm was oddly draining. Not to mention this rain... Granger was perfectly happy to speak to anyone else, and he didn’t blame her, and wasn’t particularly keen on having her as a constant companion, but if there wasn’t any other company to be had, then he would have to make do with the Mudblood. It might turn out more amusing than he expected. She hardly engaged unless she had a question, or a request, but he could sense that she had already grown tired of the silences, too, and thus would hopefully prove more willing to talk.

His eyes scanned her book selection as he ruminated. History and botany books, a vast amount of potion and spell books and a good deal of muggle literature. He noticed most of these were too advanced for their year. Why even bother to bring so many? The Muggle books, at least those he could understand—those were perhaps not as accessible here, but why go to these lengths when the school had its own perfectly good library? He shook his head.

She had exited her room again and placed two mugs at the little sink by the worktable, then a smallish potted plant. Once done, she straightened, put her hands on her hips, and looked around.

Despite her efforts, the common area still looked barely lived in. It was cozy enough, to be sure, but there was something lacking. Draco was in no hurry to fix it though it bothered him, too. He had seen her carrying picture frames earlier and wondered who was in the photos, whether she had a secret boyfriend back home, or if they were of family. He had been ready to protest if she decided to put them up in the common area but she had kept them in her room, thankfully. Aside from the books, he would put his foot down at any other personal belongings as decoration. He did not want to create a home-like space with Granger, at least no further than where they were now.

She had arranged her books so perfectly on the shelves. He had half a mind to go over and switch some around and see if she would notice.

“I’ll be back later for patrol,” she said as she exited her room one last time, hoisting her schoolbag over her shoulder.

“Don’t be late.”

The door swung shut behind her.

Was she really off to the library again? Two trips in one day. Scandalous. He rolled his eyes.

They might as well have just built her a room there.

Or perhaps she was off to the Gryffindor Tower. That made more sense, seeing as the library closed at nine, and it was eight-thirty now.

Briefly, at dinner, he had caught a snippet of Granger’s voice as she had scolded Weasley for falling asleep in their second class. On the first day, no less. Try as he might, he still couldn’t understand just why Granger stuck to him and Potter so loyally—she was almost like a mother to them, if anything. Constantly nagging at them, reminding them to take school seriously and do their homework, trying to sneak lessons into everything. It made him want to laugh. And cringe. How many times had he heard her telling them about the importance of time management, or the best ways to take notes? He was sure her advice had merit, considering her ranking in the student body (not that he needed to check), but she couldn’t have chosen less worthy recipients to dole it on.

Do-Gooder, he thought.

And what good had all that work ever done her? Potter and Weasley were solidly average students. They might have made something of themselves had they listened to her. Those two would never learn.

If he were in her place, he’d have sent them sailing out the window a long time ago. Dead weight was dead weight. He might be lonelier now that Crabbe and Goyle were dispatched of, but he was much better off for it. Those two had never been able to sustain a decent conversation anyway—not that he had befriended them for that—but he had grown really truly tired of having to explain everything to them, and he had grown strong enough that he no longer needed them for backup. Had Granger been a Slytherin, he would have doggedly fought to form an alliance with her, but she had stuck fast to the other two and the three Gryffindors had been as thick as thieves since first year and it wasn’t like anyone was asking for his opinion anyway. He was wasting his time even thinking about this.

Rain tapped loudly on the fogged window, the charmed glass muffled the howling wind outside. His foot tapped irritably on the floor. That blasted rain. If it wasn't raining so hard he'd be free to go to the Quidditch field and fly around some. Perhaps he should just go for a walk inside the castle, but the common room was warm and comfortable and he found he didn't feel like getting up, anyhow. In an hour they were to begin their patrol and search for students who might be out breaking rules. He found it funny that now he was in a position of power where he could discipline students for something he had done repeatedly over the last several years. Lots of students did it—the trick was to know your way around, and not get caught. He knew the three Gryffindors did it all the time—they weren't exactly secretive about it, either, but somehow they'd never really gotten caught aside from one occasion he could remember off the top of his head. When he'd caught them and that oaf with that dragon, he'd been sent to the Forbidden Forest as well, which was highly unfair. That injustice of it still stung. He consoled himself that at least the half-giant had been forced to relinquish his precious dragon.

Their rooms were on opposite sides of the common room, hers was deep rouge, with heavy gold-colored curtains and a warm plush carpet. His was emerald and silver, with a cold marble floor just like in his old dorm. Both had similar furnishings; a twin-size four-poster bed with curtains for privacy, a roaring fireplace and a wide window that let in lots of light. He'd noticed their rooms had no desks, but there was a large table in the common room where they would both have to work in. He could tell the Headmaster was behind this.

Draco glared daggers at her door and strode into his own room. They might as well have shackled them together if they really wanted to get the point across. To think that he had to deal with this for the rest of the year... He changed out of his school uniform into a black dress shirt and trousers. Once his robes were back on he began to pace around the room impatiently, passing a hand through his hair occasionally. This confinement due to the weather was going to drive him insane.

Five minutes before ten, Draco got up and stretched, having woken from a nap only recently. He went to take a piss and then pulled on his robe, glanced at the clock again. If Granger didn't arrive quickly, he would hold to his promise and start without her.

He left the common room and leaned against a wall, glanced at his watch again. Footsteps registered, and he looked up in time to see Granger as she rounded the corner and entered the short passageway that led to their common room.

"Good. You're ready."

"I was about to leave," he said.

"There were still two minutes left." She opened the entrance by whispering the password, ducked inside to drop her schoolbag at the coatrack by the door, and returned.

"Let's go."

She walked off towards their scheduled route. Nodding to a pair of Slytherin prefects also on patrol that were just passing by, Malfoy caught up to her quickly.

"Granger." She kept walking. He called her again. Nothing.

Had she not heard him at all or was she ignoring him? He didn't like either option so he reached forward and caught her wrist, jerking her back towards him. Just as quickly he felt a stinging hex on his arm, forcing him to let her go in surprise.

"What the hell was that for? Don't do that!" She hissed, pointing her wand straight into his face.

"Maybe if you'd answered me in the first place, I wouldn't have had to resort to physical contact, pet." He drawled, quirking one fine eyebrow at her wand which was aimed between his eyes.

She lowered it slowly. "Don't call me pet. I'm not yours."

"What shall I call you, then?"

"Just 'Granger' will do. No need for anything else."

She walked away, her *Lumos*-lit wand held aloft in the darkened corridor.

Draco walked at his own pace, scanning the area he walked past without much interest. It was only the first day of classes—who would even bother being out past curfew right now?

Hermione walked along; making sure to scan each crevice and empty classroom to make sure no one was out of bed. Still confused to why he'd snatched her wrist earlier, she flexed her hand. Her wrist still felt the impression of his grip on it, though it had been brief and had not hurt. Add that to their incident of the week before had her wondering in what manner he had been raised that he thought this sort of behavior was acceptable. She never thought he'd stoop down to actually hurting someone. She'd known him for a good deal of time, but she'd never seen him that way before.

The Malfoy she knew had always hidden behind his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, or threats that usually included his father. This Malfoy was different. It was unsettling. She still had the burn mark on her neck from his wand, as well. Harry had noticed it during Charms. She'd panicked and waved it off as an old scar. He hadn't looked fully convinced but in the end, had said no more and she found herself wondering why she had lied. She'd handled the incident, hadn't she? Poorly, admittedly, but so far she and Malfoy had not broken their civility agreement and so there had been peace—or a slim semblance of it. She What would the others say if they knew she couldn't handle Malfoy? He might be more aggressive, yes, but she had handled worse before, and if she had faced Basilisks and centaurs and Death Eaters before and lived, then she could manage this.

Draco watched her carefully as she walked, lost in thought. She was slowing down. No doubt she was over-thinking that enormous brain of hers as always. Those blasted brown curls swung across her back as she pushed them off her shoulder. Fascinated by their movement, he pictured running his hand through them, the way they might bounce. He wanted to take his wand and shear those curls off her head. For years, every time she'd best him in a class, he longed to reach over and give those curls a good yank, just to hear her scream. He had to sit in class and watch the back of that damned head and watch her arm shoot into the air eagerly to answer question after question like some sort of creature that had been made exclusively for that purpose.

She'd always been a very sharp thorn in his side, that Granger. The Golden Girl of the school, the smartest, most loved by all the professors. With that shrewd, bossy mouth, her know-it-all attitude constantly made him want to use an Unforgivable on the nearest person. On the first Hogwarts Express ride he had ever taken, he had found her and sensing immediately that she was useful. She looked clever and confident, he'd caught her practicing a few spells in her compartment, and right then he could tell she was really something. Until he'd found out she'd already stuck herself to Potter and Weasley and on top of that, the girl was Muggleborn.

What a pity, he thought, and then realized with a start he was echoing what his father had said.

But it was true—his father had been right. She had matured rather well, not that he'd ever admit it to anyone. Her eyes held an expression of intelligence within their dark brown depths, bewitching to many who looked into them. Those eyes challenged him so often, it was a secret pleasure to taunt and tease her and watch as the annoyance and anger grew there. Her hair, regardless of how it had looked in the past, had a charm of its own. Her lips were more enticing than they had any right to be. When they spoke to each other, he sometimes caught his gaze lingering to them and he would lose track of what she was saying. Any time he looked at her, her pale skin made him think of blood and he didn't know why. Those looks, those brains, and skill would have made her the ultimate Pureblood trophy wife, were she Pureblood. He would pursue her aggressively to make her the lady of the Manor he would one day inherit.

But of course she was a Mudblood and there was their ongoing rivalry and her aggravating tendency to not be able to shut her mouth. She was too good. The girl had a talent for making him want to break something, namely her.

Draco let out an inaudible sigh. The loud dripping sound coming from all around them was annoying, and it was dark, cold and too damn quiet down here. He needed a distraction. There was nothing there but him and the subject of his thoughts, unfortunately. So he approached her and called her name. This time she acknowledged him warily—he noticed how she tensed and moved away as she felt him come up beside her, so for fun, he only moved closer.

"What were you calling me for earlier, anyway?" She asked.

"I don't remember."

"Was it important?"

"I can't know if I can't remember."

"It'll come back to you, I'm sure," she said distractedly, casting a *Lumos* and peering into a deep alcove. They walked on for several more minutes in silence. As that time stretched on, Draco sighed.

"There must be *some* conversation, Granger. I'll lose my mind if it's always going to be like this."

"Talk, then, if you must," she said, disinterestedly. "If it'll get you to stop pouting."

"Very funny. Have you ever thought of cutting your hair, Granger? Or shaving it all off? I'd prefer the latter, to be truthful."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione brushed a stray curl off her forehead and said, "I like my hair the way it is. It's no matter to me whether you like it or not."

Draco eyed the mass on her head disdainfully, twirling his wand in his hand. "Would you let me cut it?" he inquired.

She looked at him with annoyed eyes and replied with a curt "No."

"Your wrists aren't hurt?"

"No. And I'll thank you not to grab at me like that again."

"Good. I don't need you siccing your friends on me. And noted. I'm afraid my temper gets the better of me."

"Then control it better," she said simply. "That's no excuse—and if I wanted to get even, I would do it alone."

"You're more vengeful than you let on," he remarked.

"You supply the reasons."

"I don't think I can deny that."

They turned a corner.

"If we must talk, we still haven't set up rules for the dorm," Hermione said.

"I would assume the standard rules apply."

"They do, but I think there's more we need to establish."

"Just give me a copy of your studying schedule," he said. "I'll *try* to stay out of your way."

"Not only that," she said, "I think while we're still getting accustomed to being around each other, we shouldn't have other people over."

"Do your friends apply to this rule? I will only agree if you say yes."

"Of course they are. They're as keen to be around you as I am. I don't want fights breaking out."

He shrugged. "Pity. If I'm to live with you for the year I'll need entertainment."

She gave him a look. "Entertain yourself."

That I will, he thought wickedly.

"Will I be allowed outside my room now and then?" he asked.

"Provided you behave yourself, then perhaps."

"Merlin." He laughed. "Shall I just call you Warden?"

She ignored him and they turned into another corridor. Hermione entered an open classroom that had the lights on. The room was empty, but broken bottles of ink lay on the floor, evidence of Peeve's boredom. She cleaned it quickly while Malfoy waited outside. She returned and closed the door behind her, spelling away the still-wet ink from her hands.

"You're welcome to read my books if you like. All I ask is you treat them carefully and put them back where you found them."

"I have no interest in your books, but duly noted."

"I wake up and go to bed early most days. I don't mind noise, but try to keep it at normal levels."

"No problem there."

"For our duties, we live together now, so as long as we communicate and share the work evenly, things should go smoothly."

"Fine."

She looked at him expectantly. "Have you no rules of your own?"

"Don't touch me or my things, don't bother me unless it's urgent, knock before entering. Simple, really."

"Fine," Hermione agreed.

"Though I feel that first rule of yours should be edited a bit. I don't want your friends in my dorm ever."

"*Our* dorm." She frowned. "I'd make sure not to have them over while you're there, and as long as you don't antagonize each other nothing should go badly."

"Granger. I don't want them there at all. Having to live with you is bad enough, I don't want the other two-thirds of your group making this unbearable."

"We'll settle on something, I'm sure," she said, rolling her eyes.

Draco stopped. Exasperated, Hermione turned to glare at him.

"They're my friends, Malfoy."

"You've got the rest of the castle to work with, Granger. Don't be greedy."

She opened her mouth. He cut her off.

"I don't want them there. I'm not moving on this."

"Fine, then. But the same applies to your friends."

"Gladly, if it means I don't have to deal with yours."

They finished their rounds without another incident, thankfully, and headed back up the many flights of stairs to their common room. Hermione sailed through the entrance once she had given the password, not bothering to hold it open for Malfoy.

She sat down at the large table and pulled out her bag from beneath it, pulling a roll of parchment and her quill out, spreading them neatly over the table.

Malfoy watched her sit and prepare to write a letter. He stretched out on the couch again, not wanting to sleep just yet, and stifled a yawn.

"You're not still angry about my rule, are you?"

"I think you're being a bit unreasonable," she said, extracting a quill from her bag and inspecting the tip. "But no, I'm not angry."

"Letter home?" he drawled, resting his hands behind his head.

"I never imagined you were this chatty," she replied, writing out the date at the top of the parchment.

"I'm full of surprises, Granger."

"So I'm learning," she said wearily. "Weren't you the one who said something about not becoming friendly? You're asking a lot of questions for someone who says you don't care about me."

"I'm merely trying to pass the time, Granger, don't turn this into something it's not. You should be flattered I'm paying you this much attention, anyhow."

She snorted and looked at him from over her shoulder.

"Universally, when a person has their back turned to another and is occupied in something, they would like to be left alone." She gave him a pointed look.

"This is the common room, Granger. I'm as free to use this place as you are, and if I want to stay here then I damn well will."

She sighed loudly and returned to her letter. To appease her dramatic sigh, he said nothing for several minutes. The sound of her scrawl filled the room.

"That's a rather long letter." He eyed the parchment. "Are you complaining to your parents about me already?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes. "Never *you* mind."

"Tell them good things about me."

She scoffed and twisted in her seat, letter forgotten. "What good is there to speak of aside from the fact that you're not as messy as I thought you'd be?"

"First off," he said, holding up his pointer finger, "I'm rather handsome. Don't be shy in your description."

Her eyebrows raised. "Goodness, someone's got a healthy ego."

"Secondly," he continued, "I'm smart enough that I've got the same position as you. Jot that down."

"I'm not writing *any* of that down," she said, "so save your breath and let me write in peace." She picked up her quill and dipped it in ink.

"Thirdly, and perhaps most important," he went on, smirking, "I come from a wealthy noble family, and am pure of blood at that. That ought to excite them, don't you think?"

"My family doesn't care for classism," she said, raising a brow. "While that might be a point of pride for you, it means nothing to me. My family knows everything they need to know about you. Not everyone is going to trip over themselves to bow to you because of your status. If you haven't learned that yet then start now."

“So you’ve spoken to them about me.” He cocked a brow. “Interesting.”

“What I talk about with my parents is none of your concern.”

“No need to get so cold, Granger, I’m only trying to draw out your character.”

“We’ve known each other long enough, you should have a good sense of it by now.”

“Well, now I have the opportunity to learn more, don’t I? I suppose it’s the same for you in regards to me.”

“I know as much about you as I want to know.” She twisted in her seat, brows lowered. “I’m *busy*, Malfoy. I’m not here to entertain you every time you’re bored. If you want a conversation so badly, go babble at Peeves.”

“I do *not* babble.”

“I can’t tell the difference when I’m trying to focus on something else,” she said. “If Peeves isn’t around, go talk to the wall. I really need to write this letter.”

She turned back around to her letter with an air of finality. Anger spiked within him, sharp and dark.

“Turn around and look at me, Granger.”

Her tone was bored. “What for.”

“We aren’t finished here. You don’t get to dismiss me like that.”

“Oh, have I insulted you?” She continued to write.

Draco moved to her chair. He planted one hand firmly on the frame of its back, the other on her desk, his palm flat on her letter, smearing the wet ink.

“Hey—”

He bent low, his face inches from hers. She withdrew slightly, glaring. She had sat in the corner by the wall, and with Malfoy’s added presence, she was trapped in.

“You have no power over me,” he breathed. “*Mudblood.*”

She didn’t even flinch.

“You’re this mad because I’d rather write a letter than pay attention to you?”

“Write all the letters you want, but I won’t have you speaking to me like *I’m* your lesser here.”

“I’ll speak however I want.” She said through grit teeth. “You’re no superior to anybody else in this castle. Get it through that thick skull of yours.”

“You’re too stubborn for your own good, Granger,” he said. “No wonder you’ve always been single. Who would want to deal with that all the time? You are exhausting.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That has nothing to do with this. Now go away.”

“Your poor parents,” he said, his eyes cold and taunting. “They’ll be stuck with a spinster daughter all their days.”

"If that's the alternative to having to deal with men like you, I'd gladly stay alone," she said stiffly.

"That's probably for the best, since your charms really don't help recommend you," he said, eyeing her disdainfully. "I bet they'd offer me a hefty sum to get you off their hands. As if I'd ever want you, or their filthy Muggle money."

Her jaw was set, her eyes hard and dark.

"Get away from me."

"There you go again. You really think you're something, don't you? But I'll tell you what you really are. Lowly, inconsequential, overconfident, walking around these halls as if you own them, like you're too good for everyone else. You're an abomination to the wizarding world, and you have no place here."

She made a sudden movement to reach for her wand and on instinct, thanks to his Quidditch training, he caught her in time and grabbed her wrists, pulling her closer to him.

"Let go of me!" she gasped and began to struggle, but he was having none of it. Draco pulled her out of her chair and against the wall, kicking the chair out of the way, pinning his hips to hers and placing each hand on both sides of her head.

At last, she was frightened. The feel of her shaking against him gave him more pleasure than he wanted to admit. It was an odd rush of feeling and sudden satisfaction—or was it pleasure? He was too distracted to figure it out. She fought to push him away.

"Stop! Stupefy!" she cried, but his constrictive grip on her wrist did not allow her to aim correctly, and the spell shot up to the ceiling. "Let go, you insufferable arse!"

Her wrists throbbed with pain under his grip. He held her so tightly she could hardly move—she'd never considered how strong he might be physically, and it was frightening to feel that now that he had her cornered. She still held her wand but could not aim it at him; any spell she uttered would miss. She tried again to angle her wrist and point her wand at him but he squeezed even tighter and with a sudden ill-timed cramp, she yelped and dropped it. There was some pressure, she felt something hard on her thigh and she did *not* want to think about that. Her mind was becoming so frazzled she felt she might cry.

She kept pushing at his chest, demanding him to let her alone, but he would not budge. Her eyes met his and they were still full of anger, stormy grey clouding over like the sky before a storm. There was something else there, too, something she couldn't put her finger on, but it was making her uncomfortable, the way he was looking at her now. Her stomach twisted and she was filled with a sense of dread and fear to the likes she had never felt before—it was ominous and had come as if from nowhere, sweeping the words from her tongue to render her speechless in its wake. Her whole body reacted to it—she became tense and shuddered, goosebumps rolling like a wave over her skin.

Get away from him, that feeling said, but still stuck in its trap, the best she could do was press herself against the wall to separate the contact of their bodies.

He was coming closer, arctic eyes boring into dark brown, and then moving down, and settling on her parted lips. Involuntarily, his thumbs twitched, brushed back the hairs on her temples. She froze; her heart hammered in her throat.

And then he was gone. She almost collapsed when his weight was removed. Her lungs were about to burst and she let out a breath she had not known she was holding. Relief was another breath taken in and blood rushing to her hands, both of them stinging like mad. She hadn't even realized she'd lost feeling in them. She stared at him, heart hammering, shaken to her core.

He was standing facing away from her, running a hand through his hair.

Hermione regained her composure and bit out, "What was that? Is it a new habit of yours to push me into things and inappropriately invade my personal space? *Malfoy!*"

He'd abruptly started walking to his room without a backward glance at her. Furious, upset, she went after him.

She reached out quickly and grabbed his arm, turning him to face her. "Answer me!"

In one quick, startling movement, and before she could react, he grabbed her by the shoulders and crushed his lips against hers. Hermione jolted in shock—her mouth was open, having been in the middle of her demand. His tongue pushed in, and she gasped, her body going tense. One hand restrained her wand arm. The other wrapped around her waist, pulling her to him when she tried to lean away.

There was that fear again.

Had she not been so completely and utterly shocked by Malfoy's kiss she would have recognized it at once as the fight or flight response, and that it suddenly seemed like the most important objective of her life, that she get away from him.

She would have run if she could have. But her legs seemed locked in place, and her arms stuttered when she tried reaching up to push him away. She could feel him kissing her but couldn't process it. His tongue traced along her bottom lip. Her mind seemed to have stopped completely, and it was both terrifying and frustrating that she could not respond the way she wanted to.

Her scent filled his nostrils and made his mouth water, and he crushed his lips harder onto hers, taking cruel pleasure in the way she gasped in pain. His hand tangled into her hair and pulled her head back though she tried to resist; he bit her lips, her muffled cries of pain and anger only drove him on, shockingly, hopelessly aroused.

Distantly, he knew he had crossed a line and should stop. But he found he didn't care.

The moment he had kissed her she had frozen completely, but within seconds she had started up again like a vengeful cat and pummeled his chest as best as she could, but the blows were weak and he had a firm enough grip on her that ensured she could not get away.

This was the last thing she had ever expected to happen. His eyes were closed, and she watched him as he kissed her as if experiencing it from outside her body. His painful grip on her shoulder made her eyes water in pain, the other was caught in her curls, holding her so close to him she could feel the hard points of his body biting into hers. Screaming or protesting was made difficult by his lips, he'd only press his lips harder against her own, and who knew kissing could hurt? She was short of breath and her heart hammered away inside

her ribs; her ears were full of the sound of his fevered breathing, her own stifled whimpers. There was bound to be cuts on her lips from the sharp bites he'd given them—she could already taste a bit of blood. Malfoy gave another sharp bite and Hermione flinched, pushing roughly at his shoulders, arms, chest, all to no effect.

“Malfoy-!”

The kiss broke—he opened his eyes and saw her, stunned, ravaged, furious. His thoughts snapped back into place. They were both breathing heavily. She was still shaking, eyes dazed, red, and he was struck with the shocking urge to do it again.

Without warning he pushed her away and she, who had been trying so hard to escape, fell backward to the floor and landed painfully on her backside. He watched her with an unreadable expression. So shocked was she that she was still staring at the space where he had been moments prior, but within seconds her eyes cleared and her hand came up to her swollen lips. Her eyes flew up to meet his.

“W... Wha—” she faltered. “What the *hell* did you do?”

There it was, the anger. He could see it blazing in her eyes, pushing past the confusion. He stared at her for a second or two as if he himself was also stunned before turning and slamming himself shut into his room.

Hermione stared after him, unsure of what to do. Part of her wanted to follow, blast open his door, and curse him to within an inch of his life. The other part of her wanted to lock herself in her room and cry. She had never felt so violated. She pressed her fingertips to her lips gingerly. She could still taste him. The thought made her shiver in disgust.

Slowly, she picked herself up, walked into her room and shut the door, her arms wrapped around herself.

Malfoy had just kissed her.

Malfoy. The arrogant, racist bastard had kissed her.

He took my first kiss.

His cruel words from earlier resurfaced in her thoughts, amplifying the hurt.

Agitated, humiliated, furious, she pointed her wand at the glass vase on her bureau and it shattered. Pieces of glass flew everywhere.

She took a deep breath to calm down and then mended the vase with a tap of her wand. It wouldn't do to break every piece of furniture in the room. Tempting, but she had to figure out what had just happened.

He kissed me.

But why? Had he not known she didn't want him to?

Hadn't he heard her pleas for him to stop? Granted, they had been muffled due to his lips (she shivered again), but she had hit and pushed him! She had given clear signs that was something she did not want!

It's like he didn't care, she thought.

This wasn't like him. This was so unlike him. It was like he was a completely different Malfoy from the one she was used to, and it scared her.

Her lips were sore and tender. She refrained from reaching up to touch them again. She felt slightly ill, and worst of all vulnerable. She had always prided herself on being quick to react in the face of danger, but had let herself down today, and had let Malfoy keep his control over the assault. She had stood there like a petrified idiot and let him do what he wanted. Her cheeks burned.

Questions raced through her mind as she changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth, washing her mouth thoroughly afterward. If she wanted answers, she would have to confront him the next day. Tears stung her eyes, and she fell asleep clutching her wand tightly underneath her pillow.

Draco was on a high. He paced the length of his room quickly, back and forth, back and forth, dragging his hands through his hair, grabbing fistfuls of it and pulling at it until a headache began to form. Fury and pleasure overtook his mind and body and for now, he was a slave to the feeling. He'd kissed her, and it had been amazing. But why had he kissed her? What in damnation had prompted him to do it? Try as he might, he couldn't piece it together. For now, all he could blame it on was the morbid curiosity over her that had plagued him recently. Hate was a good motivator, too. If she had just ceased talking and stayed in her place, this never would have happened.

He should have just walked away. Draco quickly paced around his room, kicking his school bag aside. The fire was the only light source, drowning his chamber in warm light. He felt the fire's heat as if it were hers, as if she was still pressed against him.

He had kissed the Mudblood. He should have felt repulsed but was surprised that he didn't. She had felt good, even as she struggled and protested he had loved every second of it, perverse as that sounded, he couldn't deny it.

She had been as shocked as him, clearly. In some twisted way, that made the kiss even better.

He'd been so close to kissing her before when he had her trapped against the wall, but tore himself away in time. And then the silly girl ran after him demanding him to answer her and he couldn't hold back any longer. The little fool should have known better than to push him. Seeing the fury blazing in her eyes and her pale face glaring daggers up at him set him off. Those plump lips parted in a snarl, that defiant little chin poking up at him, and... *oh*. His body was responding again. Damn it all.

*Why? Why **her**?*

Old, shamefully acknowledged fantasies sprung to mind. Granger, underneath him and bent over a desk with her skirt pushed up, a gag in her mouth. Granger, with her tie knotted around her wrists, her legs around his hips, his cock buried deep. Granger sucking him off in the Restricted Section, tears running down her face, kneeling at his feet as she ought to.

He had always surmised that if it ever happened, he would have satisfied his curiosity and moved on. Granger was a very pretty girl, and possibly a good snog if she didn't just stand

there, but she was still bossy and uptight, and he just couldn't stand her. He never would have thought he would have broken off that kiss still wanting more. And more.

He ran his hand through his hair again, gritting his teeth.

So he felt a physical attraction towards the girl. What did it matter, anyway? He wasn't the only one. She was obviously innocent and the taboo of it all was probably another reason why it was so enticing. It wasn't like he was in *love* with her; he was simply in need of a good fuck, that was all.

It'll go no farther than this, he thought firmly, trying his best to push the memory away, but it was of little use, and his erection could not be ignored.

Was she going to tattle again? He expected so. Briefly, he wondered if she would be open to a bribe.

Definitely not.

Potter and Weasley would come running to tear him apart. Would she tell Dumbledore, too? After this, she absolutely would not want to work with him again. They would have the satisfaction of seeing him thrown out of his post.

He grit his teeth and hurried to his private bathroom, went to the shower and turned the tap to the cold water.

4. Sanctuary

I do not own Harry Potter.

Chapter Four: Sanctuary

Class was almost over. The Professor's lecture could not have retained her attention if he suddenly turned into a dragon and began to dance. Her thoughts were more unfavorably occupied and had not ceased being so since the night before. Not even in her sleep had she been able to escape that horrid kiss—she had dreamt of that boy from the library, and they had kissed, but a second later his mouth had grown horrifically wide, full of sharp teeth, and he had bitten and torn her lips off with them, and blood had gushed from the hole in her face. She'd woken up in a panic, feeling for her mouth in the dark. She had not been able to fall asleep again for the rest of the night.

As the sun rose and the skies outside her window lightened, she resolved to confront Draco and demand to know why he'd kissed her. To hell with the civility agreement. He himself had shattered that, and she was to pay in kind the second she saw him in the morning. At her regular time she had hastened to dress and stormed off to his door, a thousand angry thoughts throbbing in her head but none so much as her fist, which was clenched and poised, ready to hit its mark as soon as it opened his door. The chance never came. Hermione had knocked and hammered at his door but no one answered, and when she looked around his cloak and school bag were missing from their usual spot by the coat rack; she assumed he'd gone to sleep in the Slytherin dorms, or he had somehow left the dorm earlier.

Coward.

She had class with the Hufflepuffs today; the only other Gryffindor in the room was Cormac McLaggen, who'd taken the seat beside her without asking. She could see him from her peripheral view, glancing at her now and then though she wasn't sure why. Strong chin and jaw, tousled blonde hair, and an arrogant smile. Rather easy to get along with—between the both of them they carried most of the class and from time to time Hermione found herself almost wishing he'd been made Head Boy rather than Malfoy. Cocky as he might be, she knew she would rather deal with his self-confidence over Malfoy's outright cruel arrogance.

The class had been assigned by the Professor to read the next chapter and take notes. The sounds of quills scratching on parchment filled the room. Everyone was still reading and writing except for her; she'd read the chapter the day before and had taken notes already. Despite that, she still usually took lots of notes during lectures but today her paper was a blank as Malfoy's expression had been when he had finally let her go. The absolute silence in the room was threatening to make her doze off but her mind was buzzing again, and suddenly she felt quite jittery.

She tapped the tip of her quill absently on her cheek, not realizing there was still ink on it.

Should she tell Harry and Ron?

She had debated over this all night.

They were all very close—many a sensitive topic had been brought up before amongst them, in private. But this was something of a different sort. They never spoke of anything romantically related, except for Cho Chang a few years ago, and they had barely even talked about it at that. Ron had made those vicious remarks about Krum and had been rather... indelicate about his attraction to Fleur Delcour. Was this something she could comfortably talk about to them? She loved them both dearly but they were not always as mature as she'd like them to be, and the fact that the experience had not been consensual was another complicated layer over the whole matter, because it had been her first time kissing anyone and he had done it in such a way that she had felt weak and utterly humiliated. She might be the top student in the school, she might have lived through several encounters where the odds had been stacked against her, but she had not been able to get away from him. That stung. That stung *deep*.

Her cheeks flushed with anger. Had someone knocked him hard in the head over the summer or had he always been so vile? It was hard to tell. She'd never been so exposed to him for so long so continuously. Brief encounters in between classes, words thrown at each other, unwilling partnership in projects were really all she was used to but something had changed, and the more she thought it over the more she was sure of it. In the past, he had mostly focused his provocations and insults on Harry and Ron. Not that she had been bereft, she had experienced her fair share, but now that they were in such close quarters, who was the easier target?

She would have to confront him, and soon. Whatever his deal was, she could not let him continue.

Or else I'll become afraid of him, and that can't happen.

Already, she was dreading seeing him again.

A movement to her left caught her attention. Cormac was trying to slip her a note. She caught it with a discrete glance towards the professor, who was grading papers at his desk all the way at the front of the room.

You've got ink on your cheek

Mortified, Hermione ducked her head down and swiped at her cheek with her sleeve. Cormac chuckled silently, then took the note back and scribbled something on it, then slid it to her.

It's smeared now.

Hermione threw up her hands and he laughed again. He leaned over, and gently tapped twice on the exact spot the ink lay.

Hermione froze under his touch, reminiscent over the events of the previous night. Icy trickles of unease traveled down her spine but Cormac finished and pulled his hand away.

She wet a bit of her sleeve in her mouth with saliva and cleaned her cheek.

He nodded in silent confirmation that it was gone.

Hermione wrote '*thank you*' on the note and slid it back to him. He nodded and winked.

At that moment, a knock sounded on the classroom door. There was a ruffle about the room as everyone looked up. Hermione felt a bolt of dread run through her as Malfoy stepped in.

“Yes?” The Professor asked.

“Excuse me, Professor, I need to see Miss Granger. Head student business,” Malfoy said.

It didn’t slip past Hermione how the ‘Miss’ sounded forced and sarcastic.

The Professor nodded at Hermione, waving his hand. She packed her things and waved goodbye to Cormac, who winked again at her. Pretending not to have noticed, she walked out of the room, not bothering to meet up with Draco, who was still at the door. She was adjusting her schoolbag on her shoulder when he caught up to her.

“It’s the other way. McGonagall wants to see us.” He swept past her, nearly toppling her over. Hermione’s mouth almost went slack in disbelief.

So he was going to pretend it never happened, then.

Like hell, I will.

She wanted answers, and she wanted them *now*. The corridor was empty besides them, they had gone far enough that there was nothing here but unused or locked classrooms, and here she found her chance.

Pulling out her wand, she pointed it at Malfoy and whispered an immobilizing spell. A yellow jet of sparks hit him in the back, and he stopped dead in his tracks. Hermione calmly walked up to the frozen Malfoy and stood in front of him, trying not to think about how her hands were shaking.

Malfoy’s eyes were positively glacial. The look he gave her was of utmost loathing—his nostrils flared, and a red flush crept up his neck.

“What do you think you’re doing?” His voice was cold and smooth, not a trace of anger in it. It put her on edge but she went on.

“You very well know why I froze you. We need to talk about last night.”

“What is there to talk about?” He asked, his stare challenging.

She seethed. “*Why* did you kiss me?”

He looked at her coolly. “It was the only way to get you to be quiet.”

“The devil’s tooth it was! You were the one who wouldn’t stop talking or leave me alone, even when I asked you to leave.” Her volume lowered. “And you had *no* right to kiss me, especially against my will!”

Malfoy gave a hard laugh. It sent a shiver down her spine, making the fine hairs on her arms prickle.

“You never listen to me, Granger. You would only have gotten louder. You were *asking* for it.”

In a flash of movement, her wand was pointed at his nose, glowing white with heat. If she pressed it to his skin it would have burnt through his flesh and he watched her carefully with a trace of unease, waiting for the moment she chose to strike.

“I wasn’t asking for anything, you bloody pervert. You took my first kiss; something I was saving for the right person and it certainly wasn’t meant for someone like you.”

Malfoy simply smiled at her, a cold, hard smile, fake pity in his gaze.

“Oh, Granger. Only you would be upset at the fact that someone took your precious little first kiss. Is no one is willing enough to kiss you? You should feel honored I ever did it. I’m likely the only one who’s ever been considerate enough to put you out of your misery. It’s not every day I’m forced to kiss a Mudblood, especially one so loathsome as you.”

Wand forgotten, she slapped him in the face, putting enough force behind it to leave a mark. With a strange sense of elation, she felt his flesh against her palm and heard the crack of her strike, and though she knew it was wrong, she felt better once it was done.

Malfoy’s head snapped back with the force of the blow. A drop of blood from his nostril slowly made its way onto his lips. He clenched his fists in fury and realized her concentration on the immobilizing spell had broken and he could move again. To make sure it wasn’t a trick he moved his arm again subtly, but she didn’t seem to have noticed. The witch was breathing hard; her mouth curled in a snarl. Anger brought a brilliant spark to her eyes, and her teeth were slightly bared at him as she eyed him, unaware her spell had broken. She looked like she might hit him again.

I think not, he decided.

When she opened her mouth to say something else he took the opportunity to lunge at her. At once her eyes widened and she tried to twist away but it was too late. He caught her by the waist and took her down with him onto the floor in a rush of curls and a small scream, which he muffled with his palm.

He landed roughly on her. His chest had rammed into her shoulder and almost knocked the breath from him. She was stirring underneath him, shaken, clutching at her shoulder, grimacing. She was struggling to breathe under his weight.

“Get-off—”

Apparently, she’d hit her head hard on the ground; her face was scrunched up in pain, a tear slid out of her shut eye. He didn’t care. Despite very badly wanting to hex her back he did not draw out his wand, as that would only make things worse, and they were exposed enough here. If Filch walked in on them now it would be the end of everything.

“B-bastard...” she whispered, and shoved at him. He relieved her of his weight and rearranged himself to straddle her.

Draco swiped her spit off of his cheek with his sleeve.

*It’s like she **wants** me to kill her.*

Damnation, the witch must have been crafted by demons to torment him. If there were gods they must have been laughing at him.

Brought low by a Mudblood.

He wanted to slap her, but it seemed she was in enough pain from her tumble so he made do with sharply pulling at a lock of her hair and she winced.

"I warned you not to touch me, Granger. That was one of my rules, after all."

"I didn't make that one of my rules because I thought it went without saying," she said, blinking hard, trying to force the fuzziness from her vision. "But it stands as well as yours does, and seeing as we've given up being civil..."

Bringing her knees up she tried to punch him in the face, his stomach, anywhere so he could get off her. But he lazily caught her wrists and leaned in closer, his face jeering.

"*Let me go,*" she hissed, and tried to turn onto her side to make him lose his balance.

It was a miracle the civility rule had lasted as long as it did, what with how easily they spurred each other into fights.

"You need to learn to respect your superiors, Mudblood." She struggled underneath him, but he held fast to her.

Hermione scoffed. "By superiors, I hope you don't mean yourself."

With tremendous effort, she yanked her wrists out of his grasp and kned him in the groin. He made a loud, almost strangled sound and let her go, his hands going to cup himself. His face contorted with pain and he doubled over, clenching his teeth, his head over her chest. Hermione shoved him to the side easily and scrambled back up, locating her wand on the floor and clutching it tightly.

"You little *bitch*," he groaned from the floor.

"That's for last night," she said, nearly shivering with a sense of justice. "Don't you ever do it again."

He was on his knees, panting, struggling to get up. She debated leaving before he got himself back together but had one more question.

"I'll get you for that," he said hoarsely.

"Why did you pull me out of class?"

He ignored her and managed to stand, wincing just a bit.

She took an involuntary step back; he was leaning forward, towering over her. His eyes were almost frightening, filled with hate.

"Don't you come closer," she warned. "You will regret it."

He paused, gauging the threat in her eyes. Hermione stood her ground, wishing the urge to run wasn't threatening to make her knees give out.

After some tense seconds of them facing off in this manner, he relented and stepped back.

"McGonagall wanted to see us," he said, his voice like a sharpened dagger. He turned and advanced into the hall, robes billowing behind him, and alone, Hermione let out a long,

shuddering breath.

After their meeting with McGonagall, Hermione found herself in her sanctuary: the library. She had her own private little nook here, tucked away by the Restricted Section. It was deep into the back of the library, where no student ever passed by and she could study or read or even sleep in peace for long periods of time which she did often, especially around finals time. Hidden all around by large bookshelves, there was a beautiful stained glass window set into an arched alcove, where a cushioned seat was tucked cozily into it, creating a cozy little nook where one could rest or read. It was Hermione's opinion that it was the most beautiful place in the castle: it had books, it was quiet, it was simple and comfortable and lovely, and it was hers.

A table and chairs were set a few feet away from the alcove, directly in the weak sunlight. When the sun set the lamps all came on at once in the library, casting an unearthly yellow glow all around, which she didn't quite like as much as she felt it stole some of the charm from her nook. Hermione visited it almost daily and kept it a secret from everyone. She had never even brought Harry and Ron here as it was too sacred for her. Whether she was studying or reading or simply resting from a long day, she always came here. If she was expecting someone to join her, she would sit in the front of the library where it was more populated, so she could retreat here once done with socializing. No one knew of this spot, the students never came this far back into the vast library and that was why she liked it best. No one bothered her here. She always felt safe.

Most everyone else liked to occupy the higher floors of the library since they were better shielded from Madame Pince's shrewd, all-seeing eyes. Hermione had done so too, until her fourth year, when she had been trying to avoid Viktor Krum's shy stares and had stumbled upon the secret place.

As she leaned back into the side panel of the alcove, she thought of what had happened earlier between herself and Malfoy. They had walked in silence to McGonagall's office, where she, on Dumbledore's behalf, had asked how well they were working together. Malfoy had been stiff in his chair and never looked at her. Hermione had opened her mouth, ready to tell the truth, but before she uttered a word, he'd cut in and said they were both getting along just fine.

She'd been too surprised and irate to protest, sending him a suspicious look instead. He'd been calm and collected for the rest of the interview. Now and then he would shift in his seat, still in pain, and just seeing that gave her such satisfaction that she lied easily about them not having much trouble at all.

If we're both in on this, then it's been resolved, she told herself. Nobody needs to know. I handled it.

Once dismissed, Malfoy had lingered to ask McGonagall some question about her lecture from their class earlier, and Hermione, eager to not be around him more than she already had that day, left the office. It didn't occur to her later that he had done so not because he really had questions, but so that she would not reveal anything to Professor McGonagall, had he left

first. She had headed for the rest of her classes feeling better, but just slightly. All the revenge in the world couldn't make up for what had already happened.

But that look on his face after her knee had connected with his groin—that felt pretty good.

After her last class, she'd made a beeline for the library and now here she was tired and confused, looking out at the school grounds through the clear bits in the stained glass picture, trying to make out the human figures outside. Down in the Quidditch pitch, she could barely make out Harry, Ron, and Ginny on the brooms along with the rest of the Gryffindor team. There were only a few matches left in the season. Hallow's eve would be upon them in a matter of weeks. The days were getting shorter and colder; the trees had shed their leaves, and soon the leaves would either decay or be blown away, leaving the school grounds barren and empty. Her breath fogged the cold glass as she clutched her robes about her, shivering slightly. She'd have to remember to wear a thicker jumper next time.

A small crease formed between her brows as she contemplated the events over the past weeks. Malfoy had kissed her and then insulted and threatened her afterward, topping it all off with acting like none of it had ever happened. In the span of these two weeks he had already touched her the most times in the span of the (nearly) six years they have known each other. (That is to say, all the other times before this term were nonexistent because he had never touched her until now.)

What was his motive? She couldn't figure it out. Just to spite her? For the power of the Head Boy status? That couldn't be it. Head students were no more powerful than Prefects, truth be told. Why lie? Why did he want to stay in this position so badly?

Malfoy hated her. That much had always been obvious, and the sentiment was more than reciprocated. However, none of what he'd told her had made any sense—he said he'd only kissed her to shut her up. She was wholly unconvinced. There was a multitude of ways in which he could have achieved that without having to resort to a forced kiss. She shuddered, almost gagging at the memory of Malfoy's tongue in her mouth. She'd brushed her teeth (and tongue) furiously for several minutes afterward, making sure to use plenty of mouthwash.

Earlier today, one of the lower year prefects had told her Malfoy had changed his patrol partner to another Slytherin, so now Hermione was to conduct her patrols with some lower year Gryffindors. Cowardly move, but it worked for the best. After their altercation earlier, she had not been looking forward to patrols tonight and had resolved to be on her highest guard.

At least Dumbledore could remain thinking they were turning things around. The two-week trial period ended today, and if Malfoy was going to lie, then perhaps he had decided to make a new effort. He had not said anything of the sort, but she was hoping that was the case. He wasn't the sort to admit that outright, anyway. Perhaps it would do to write out a contract for him to swear to be on his best behavior. He would laugh at her and mock it to pieces, but it was worth a try... wasn't it?

Hermione sighed and sagged against the wall.

It was too much to ask for change from a Malfoy. She didn't know why she had expected things to turn out well. She should have foreseen this—well, some things she had definitely

never thought could happen, but as embarrassing as it was to admit, she had held a glimmer of hope at the start of this that something good really would come of this.

She didn't like being wrong.

She glanced at the time on the pocket watch she'd attached to her bag. Patrol would start soon, it was time for her to leave. Still, she stayed there for a few extra minutes, tracing her fingers along the outlines of the colored glass, admiring the gothic design of the structure, trying to get her thoughts together. Futile. Really pressed for time now, she slid off the seat and shouldered her bag and set out for the Gryffindor common room, where she'd agreed to meet her new partner. They were to patrol the east wing of the castle. Hopefully, they would not run into Malfoy and his new partner.

When patrol had ended and she'd gone back to the dorm, she was relieved to find it empty. The fire was still going—had he been sitting there recently? She glanced at his door. Only the soft, amber light of the fire going in his room flickered there.

Silently, she crept into her room.

She slept in the next morning, choosing to forgo breakfast. Again, Malfoy had been already gone when she'd awoken. Was he going to make a habit of getting up earlier than her just to avoid seeing her? It puzzled her, but she didn't mind at all as long as her mornings stayed peaceful.

Hermione walked into Harry and Ron on her descent into the dungeons, exchanging greetings and bits of toast they had brought for her. The trio walked into the dingy classroom, ignoring Professor Snape as he glared at them from his desk, black eyes narrowing in particular at Harry. The rest of the students streamed in behind them, their happy chatter immediately silenced by the oppressive gloom of the room and the dead stare from Snape. Malfoy sat on the opposite side of the room, facing forward, stone-faced. Hermione sat down, renewed in her ire, just as Snape stood and addressed the class.

"The instructions are on the board. Follow them and do not embarrass me." These words seemed to have been directed at the Gryffindor side of the room. He went to his desk and began to grade papers, an expression of such distaste on his face that Hermione pictured him sucking a rotten lemon as he did it.

The dingy room was filled with the quiet sounds of students gathering their ingredients and opening their textbooks. Harry wrote down the instructions as Ron began preparing his cauldron.

Hermione, of course, had already begun, working with precise movements so as to not mess up her potion. Once she had got the fire under her cauldron going, she tied up her hair. Double-checked the instructions and then poured three cups of water in and tipped powdered beetle wings into her cauldron. Next came a finely chopped snake tongue. The instructions called for her to stir clockwise for five minutes until the liquid turned red.

As she stirred, she glanced around the room. Poor Neville was having difficulty cutting the frog intestines—he looked a little green. He seemed to have skipped over several steps and was unaware of it. She was about to point it out when Seamus elbowed him and did it for her.

Neville pushed the knife away in relief. Lavender and Parvati were sneaking glimpses at the latest Witch Weekly under their desk. Lavender looked up just in time to catch Hermione's disapproving glance. She flushed and put it away quickly.

Dean Thomas seemed to be falling asleep at his cauldron. Discreetly, so as not to catch Snape's attention she raised her wand, aimed carefully, and sent Dean Thomas a stinging hex. He jerked awake, dropping his cauldron stirrer, about to swear loudly but closing his mouth when he saw his surroundings.

'Sorry,' Hermione mouthed. He shrugged, grinning, and resumed working.

Harry and Ron were both cursing under their breath; they'd reach the same stage she was just finishing, but their potions were pink. Hermione was about to whisper the remedy to them when she felt a familiar ominous presence behind them and almost jumped. When had Snape left his desk?

His flat voice commanded the attention of the class.

"Tell me, Potter, Weasley: What is that mess in your cauldrons?"

Hermione tensed. He seemed to have a knack for knowing just when Harry and Ron messed up.

Ron had gone red. Harry stared coolly back and said, "It's a Sleepwalking cure, Professor."

The Potion master's lip curled. "I don't think so, Potter. Would you honor us by reading the last line in number six on the board?"

Harry grit his teeth. "After adding the ground-up salamander spine, quickly stir the potion three times counter-clockwise."

Snape fixed his eyes on Harry. "And did you, Potter?"

Harry glared at him. "No, sir."

Snape waved his wand. Harrys' and Rons' cauldrons emptied.

"Ten points from Gryffindor. Begin again."

Hermione glanced at Malfoy. He was not looking their way, busy at his own station, but she saw the lift in his cheek hinting at a smile.

The Slytherins snickered.

Somebody coughed, disguising a not-nice word into it. Snape paused and stared at the offender.

"Filch."

Dean Thomas rose resentfully from his seat, flushing, and left the room. In the seat beside him, Seamus hurriedly turned off his burner before his potion began to burn.

Snape swept away and paused by Malfoy, whose potion he commended though it wasn't even finished. Malfoy didn't seem to care much for the praise, only nodding slightly at Snape and resuming his work.

Hermione cast Harry and Ron a sympathetic glance as she added pickled snake eyes to her potion; the final touch. It turned bright purple, just as it should. She smiled to herself.

At the end of class, she cleared away her things, keeping track of Malfoy all the while, who had not looked in her direction once throughout the class, and was now about to leave the classroom. Hermione rushed back from the storeroom and grabbed her schoolbag, intending to go after him. Just as he was slipping out the door Snape called out to her.

“See to it that you close and lock the storeroom door after you exit it. I will not be robbed again.”

Walking stiffly, Hermione went to the door and did as he bade, although she had not been the last person to exit the storeroom. Snape stared at her accusingly and she knew he referred to her second year when she had stolen ingredients to make the Polyjuice Potion with Harry and Ron. Snape turned back to his papers without another word to her, and Hermione left the room, scanning the dungeons.

Damn. Malfoy had gone already.

“What a prat,” Harry said from behind her, and Hermione jumped.

“You’d think he’d have gotten over it by now,” Ron was saying, and she nodded. “All the same, I was the last one to leave the door open. Sorry, Hermione.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, and they began their climb out of the dungeons.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Hermione retreated to the library after dinner to work on assignments. She found a lower year Ravenclaw who needed help with two bullies that had stolen her glasses along the way. They hadn’t been too far away so she found them easily and sent them to their Head of House with a citation, mended the girl’s glasses, and entered the library. After that was patrol, and when she returned to the dorm she found Malfoy was asleep in his room again. She debated pounding at his door. Favorable as it was, he couldn’t just ignore her like this for the rest of the term. She had made up the new civility agreement and wanted him to sign it. Not really possible when he was avoiding her in this manner. Hermione locked her door and went to bed, and tried to sleep, wishing Dumbledore had picked anyone else for the Head Boy position.

He might as well have chosen Moaning Myrtle and things would be going ten times better than they are now.

This behavior continued on as the days passed and collected into weeks. The weather turned colder, and Hermione found herself settling into a calm routine, never seeing Malfoy outside of class or meals. Gryffindor won the Quidditch cup (again) and celebrated dully. She, Harry, Ron, and Ginny went on the first trip to Hogsmeade and spent a fun afternoon at the Three Broomsticks. Cormac began to sit a bit closer to her during class. Patrols continued uneventfully (Except for one incident where she and her partner, Georgie, caught Peeves setting up mousetraps outside of Snape’s office. In another, they had discovered a group of students playing competitive Exploding Snap, which had resulted in an unfortunate small explosion in an empty classroom, and a shocking amount of detentions.). Malfoy continued to ignore her, and she finally relented and left the civility contract in an old folder in her trunk.

Things seemed to be working this way. An icy cohabitation was fine enough. There had been no more incidents since the altercation in the corridor. When he had a message to relay or a notice about one of their duties, he did it in notes he left on her door, and that was rare.

It might not be the sort of unity Dumbledore hoped for, she thought, but it's something.

5. Sound

It was around midnight, and she and Malfoy were patrolling the dungeons.

Hermione had been set to do her rounds with Georgie, her new patrol partner, but that morning during breakfast Malfoy had sent her a note to say his patrol partner had switched on short notice and since everyone else was already paired off, Hermione was the only available option. She had been forced to accept. From the moment they met up to now neither of them had said a single word to each other since the confrontation before the meeting with McGonagall.

Puddles of water littered the ground, the drops that had formed them over time still dripped steadily onto the cobbled stone floor. The sound hadn't bothered her at first. The eerie wash of amber light from the torches along the wall painted the darkened corridors like a strange painting, full of blacks and oranges; nothing was a clear form, everything was a thriving mass of color. She had met him outside the dorm, having just come from the Gryffindor Tower. He acknowledged her detachedly with his gaze and had begun walking, and she had followed cautiously, wondering if he would be silent the entire patrol.

Which is worse, a Malfoy who can't shut up, or one who doesn't talk at all?

The latter might seem a blessing, but it didn't feel that way at all currently. It left her on edge, and she wasn't exactly sure why, even if he hadn't said a negative word yet.

The dripping continued around them.

The pipes must be leaking, she thought, inspecting the walls. The quiet was making her tense. If it bothered Malfoy, too, he didn't let on. His presence beside her was as comforting as she imagined the Bloody Baron's would be.

She recalled how talkative he had been weeks before, and to her chagrin, wished he would revert back to that odd charisma.

A thousand thoughts were racing around her head, she wished she could just concentrate and pick one because her head was beginning to hurt. But she couldn't—not with him being so uncharacteristically silent. The steady tap, tap, tap of the water in the background reminded her of those Muggle horror movies, where a faucet would always be left on in the background before something was about to happen.

But this is Hogwarts, she told herself. *Not a cheesy Muggle film.*

To lesson both the silence and her own unease, (and perhaps also to annoy her companion into speaking) she began to hum a favorite song of hers softly; a sad and slow song. Her nerves began to settle so she continued as she patrolled. She saw Malfoy go a bit stiff as he walked and wondered if he would make fun of her but didn't care. Nothing in this situation had her at ease, so she would not be embarrassed for trying to alleviate it. Her humming echoed and bounced around the cold, damp dungeons, giving the song an eerier effect than intended. She lowered her volume, and now it was like a faint whisper around them. She was

several paces behind Malfoy, her wand lit, trying not to hum too loudly but in the near-complete silence of the dungeons, she might as well have been walking beside him.

When she had started, Malfoy had paused, somewhat taken aback. The song reverberated and wavered around him, bouncing off the cold stone.

Was Granger *singing*?

His first instinct was to turn right around and tell her to be quiet, but he held his tongue and listened, realizing rather unhappily that her voice was not bad at all to listen to. He recognized the song, too, even though he wouldn't dare admit it. It was a Muggle song, that much was obvious. He didn't normally listen to Muggle music (or ever, for that matter), but he'd chanced upon it a while ago. He'd been leaving King's Cross Station, his luggage cart being taken away by his footman. His mother was there, fussing over his suit, and he'd heard it coming from a Muggle couple who had a small radio with them. He'd taken a liking to the song and had done a little research in private. It had been some time since he had last heard it but he recognized it well enough.

It had been weeks since they had said a word to each other. He caught quick glimpses of her in class and she had seemed unbothered and engaged with friends every time. After the kiss, he had been on alert for several days, just knowing that she had told on him and that Potter and Weasley, or Dumbledore himself would come to deal out the consequence of what he had done. But nothing had happened.

Not true. There had been the day after, in the corridor, when she had possibly rendered him infertile. The memory was still fresh, and painful. He owed her for that stunt.

Still. All those weeks, he had been more bored than ever. He had taken to sleeping and rising much earlier than he normally did as a method of avoiding her, and cowardly though it might seem, he had done so knowing that if he hadn't, another fight would have occurred immediately. They had both needed to cool down, and he had a troublingly erotic memory to process still. He had given in only a day after their last incident and masturbated to the memory of her frightened whimpers, the crush of her lips against his.

It'll go no farther than this, he'd told himself after. It was turning into a mantra. But it happened again. And again. And more fantasies were emerging.

Almost as if she could sense him watching her, she began to walk a little faster. Her hips swayed, and her skirt swished against the backs of her thighs. He noticed she wasn't wearing her usual black tights, but he didn't plan on bringing it up. She must have forgotten how cold it could get down here, hence her light attire. Whatever had prompted her to don this sort of clothing for the occasion evaded him. She'd traded her school jumper for a thin purple knit sweater. Her school robe would have kept her warm enough, but she had not brought it along. He himself was wearing his usual black suit, his Head Boy badge pinned onto his lapel and wand stuck securely into his pocket.

She stopped humming briefly to check on a door that had been left open, leading into a storeroom full of chairs. He had wanted to say nothing, to continue ignoring her, to walk on. He couldn't resist. Draco stopped walking and turned to her.

"What sparked that little outburst?" He inquired.

She looked at him, surprised he'd spoken. She cleared her throat and closed the door.

"It's awful down here at night."

"I meant the song, Granger. Why did you choose that specific song?" He realized his mistake immediately and wanted to kick himself.

Granger's brows knit together. "You listen to Muggle music?"

Her tone was too incredulous and accusatory for his liking. Malfoy felt himself stiffen and his anger rose.

"It's rather impossible to live in these times without knowing some Muggle culture," he said. "Don't presume me to be so ignorant."

He didn't like the way she was looking at him. "It's just a shock, that's all."

"Yes, because wizards don't listen to radios," he snapped. "Or travel outside the wizarding communities. Or ever encounter Muggle things in any way, shape or form."

"I just thought, with your parents and all..."

"I'm not as close-minded as you seem to think," he snapped.

Hermione regretted having spoken at all. The way he could turn angry so quickly was frightening.

"No, I only meant I never thought you would be interested in Muggle music."

He scoffed. "It's one song, Granger. Get over it."

"You don't have to be so defensive about it," she said stubbornly. "If you're ashamed of it ___"

"—If I were ashamed I wouldn't have answered your question," he said impatiently. "I just don't think it important. Now drop it."

She obliged, thankfully, and they continued with their former silence. After the initial surprise had gone the incident was quite far from her mind, but not his. She was thinking she should have brought her robe because she was so cold. He thought she was planning on telling her friends.

"I had better not hear later that you're telling your friends about me," he said suddenly. "I don't care how close you are—things regarding my personal life stay private."

"You've got a lot of rules for someone who doesn't respect others," she said, raising her brows at him. "Why should I bother?"

She had him, and she knew it. Draco couldn't find an answer that wouldn't allow her to bring up the kiss.

They locked eyes. She held his stare, tilting her chin up defensively. Out of nowhere, he had the urge to kiss her, and hard. He wanted to kiss her until her lips were swollen and bruised, a sign that she was his and his alone. There was a terrifying second where he found himself pitching forwards, hands itching to grab her, but caught himself, shocked.

What the fuck was that? He stepped back. Had he imagined that? Had she noticed? She was looking at him oddly, and for a moment, he was afraid she knew what he had been thinking. The thoughts persisted. He shook his head sharply and she looked at him like he'd grown another head.

"Do as you like," he said, and walked away, leaving her in the glare of the firelight reflected off the puddles.

When they got back to the common room Hermione stopped him before he could disappear again.

"What you did that day was unacceptable." He did not look at her. They both knew what she was speaking of. "If there's something bothering you you shouldn't take it out on me. The least you could do is ask someone before you kiss them."

"Stop pushing my buttons, then."

She ignored his comment. "I've got enough to focus on without having to add your behavior to the list. No matter what I think of you Dumbledore thinks you deserve this position. Don't make me go tell him otherwise. I know we have our differences but I'm sure if we could just set those aside from time to time we can get all our duties done without clawing at each other's throats anymore."

He was looking at her now, no trace of emotion on his face despite the lifted corner of his lip. Smile or a sneer? Hermione could only guess.

"Fine," he said simply.

"Fine." She turned and entered her room, and Malfoy remained in the common room for a moment longer before entering his own chambers.

Early the next afternoon, Hermione found herself in the Head Common Room. She'd left lunch early, and she had a free double period next and was planning to go to the library for some light reading. She only had come back because she had forgotten a textbook she needed for a class. Book in bag, she proceeded to the door only to stumble upon Malfoy, who was just about to enter the Common Room himself.

He nodded in greeting. "Granger. I've just seen Dumbledore. He wants us to come up with a tutoring plan for the first years. And to begin organizing a Christmas event for the upper years."

Hermione lingered indecisively. "I was just heading to the library to begin some homework, maybe later?"

He rolled his eyes. "As inspiring as your dedication to your marks is, Granger, Dumbledore did say he'd like a draft of this by dinner tomorrow. I was all for doing it myself but Dumbledore was keen on me finding you so we could work on it together. We can work on it here."

“Fine.”

They entered the common room. Hermione gagged at the smell.

“Tell me that wasn’t you,” Malfoy said, coughing. “Fuck, that’s *disgusting*.”

Peeves bobbed in the center of the common room, a dung bomb in his hand, already triggered.

“Head Girl!” He cried, seeing Hermione. “Little Peeves has found students carrying contraband items and confiscated them! Peeves has earned himself a gold badge!”

He lobbed the grenade into the farthest corner and pulled another from midair.

“Peeves, get out, and give us those,” Malfoy said angrily.

Peeves blew a loud raspberry at him and pulled the pin on the dung bomb. It began to smoke, and the smell worsened.

“Get out of here, or we’ll call the Bloody Baron!” Hermione said loudly, trying to breathe in as little as possible. The urge to retch was growing stronger.

Peeves whooped loudly, materialized another dung bomb, and set it off, throwing it to another corner. Cackling loudly, he disappeared through the wall, making a very rude gesture with his hand.

Hermione bolted from the room, her hand pressed to her stomach.

“That rotten git,” she gasped, trying not to heave.

Malfoy had stayed behind, eyes watering from the stench, holding a section of his robe over his nose, trying unsuccessfully to rid the room of the essence of the dung bombs. The room was hazy with smoke. He opened the windows as a last resort and joined Hermione outside in the corridor. She had regained her composure and shook her head, shot a glare to the end of the corridor, where they could faintly hear Peeve’s cackling as he floated away.

“We’ll have to go to Filch to get the stink out.”

Filch had been extremely unhappy to learn Peeves was in the possession of an unknown number of dung bombs, and even unhappier to learn he had already set them off. He had glared at the two of them as they told him what had happened and without a word, grabbed a bucket full of household cleaning products (of the magical variety) and set off for their dorm.

“What now, then?” Hermione asked. “He probably won’t be done for a while.”

“You were going to the library, weren’t you? We’ll work there.”

Hermione cursed Peeves silently and began the walk to the library. Malfoy sniffed at his robes and followed.

We’ll just get this over with and then I’ll have my peace, she thought.

Upon entering the library, however, Hermione was dismayed to see every table in sight was occupied. It seemed the lower years had some sort of big exam, each table was buried in

papers and books, surrounded by their worried little faces set in concentration.

Malfoy sighed, annoyed now, and looked around the library, scanning the room for an empty table. No luck. He was sure if he walked up to a table and demanded whoever was using it to leave, they would do so immediately, but Granger wouldn't like that, and after this Peeves incident he was in no mood for an argument.

He turned to Granger, who seemed to be thinking deeply on something, biting on her lower lip.

"It's packed, Granger. There's no room here. Let's just go to the Great Hall." He was about to take a step towards the doors when she stopped him.

"We came all this way," she said firmly. "There must be *one* unoccupied table."

"Unlikely," he said, looking around, frowning.

Cross, Hermione wandered around and searched for an empty table, and found none. What the hell was going on? She hadn't seen the library this full in ages.

She walked back to Malfoy.

"Let's just go," he said impatiently, turning to leave. "We'll work in the Great Hall. This has taken enough time already."

"Wait. There is one place..." She seemed at war with herself over something, but apparently, she had made her decision for she set her jaw and beckoned him to follow her, walking off at a fast, determined pace.

Draco followed her deep into the dark recesses of the library, wondering what this was all about. The bookcases here looked older, less cared for, and the selection of the books in them was the same way. Funny, he had never been so far back into the library before. In fact, no one ever came all the way back here (except her, of course), and suddenly it occurred to him she might still be angry at him for kissing her and could be luring him back here to hex him or something. His hand hovered by his pocket, ready to snatch out his wand at a moment's notice.

The further they went, the more nervous Hermione got.

Why am I doing this?

Was it too late to turn back? She could picture the look of confusion on his face if she did. She would look an utter fool if she turned back now. He would think she had led him on a goose chase.

She was taking Malfoy to her most favorite place in all of Hogwarts, a place her own best friends hadn't been to, or even knew about. She still didn't know if this was a good decision, and was about to change her mind and turn back when she realized they had reached their destination.

"This is my study space," she said somewhat lamely, not knowing what else to say.

"Your'?"

She shrugged. "No one else comes here."

Hermione watched him through the side of her eye. The way he was looking at her and at the place, she knew he suddenly understood her indecision to bring him here.

Interesting... Malfoy eyed the little area with great curiosity. It was a quaint place, cozy and comfortable, with the light streaming in from the stained glass set the little nook aglow with different colors. This place was so isolated from everyone else and the rest of the library, it was no wonder she spent nearly all her waking hours here. It was an ideal place for relaxing.

It's perfect for her.

"So this is where you come to disappear so often."

She frowned.

"A little peace seems unobtainable sometimes in this castle."

Hermione suddenly felt naked, as if she'd bared her soul to him, and she didn't like it at all. This had been a bad idea, but there was no turning back now. Squaring her shoulders, she marched to the table and pulled out her seat, dropping her schoolbag onto the table. Malfoy lingered before the table, but her raised brow summoned him forward and he smoothly sat down in his own seat directly in front of her, placing his bag on the table.

Annoyed, Hermione frowned slightly at his seating choice—she'd hoped he would have sat a bit farther away, but she didn't want to be rude or start another argument. He was behaving, and she therefore had nothing to complain about.

"I already came up with a tutoring program, so if you don't mind, you can begin on the holiday event." He handed the piece of parchment over to her, his large hand glowing in the colored light.

"Can I see it?"

He handed it to her and she went over it slowly.

"Any suggestions?" He asked when she gave it back.

"No. It's good."

Hermione took out her quill and some blank parchment, and began to brainstorm.

"I think a Christmas dance would do nicely," Hermione mused. "The Yule Ball in fourth year went well, why not have another?"

"That sounds like a lot of work."

"Not necessarily, if we organize it correctly."

Malfoy shrugged. "We'd have to ask for a budget. We'd need to do something about music, and ask where the decorations are."

"Right," said Hermione as she wrote it down. "Hagrid always gets the trees, I'll Flitwick if his music students would be interested in playing for the event." She ignored the face Malfoy pulled when she mentioned the half-giant.

Together, they wrote down a list of things they needed to do in preparation for the ball. Hermione was to reach out to the Headmaster with a draft of the proposed expenses for the event and other details included. They would wait to see what their next move was once they had a reply with approval or rejection.

Hermione decided to remain in the library and work on other assignments. Malfoy offered to take the draft up to the Headmaster's office and she accepted and handed it over.

"You realize he's going to use this event as a way to show off our... teamwork to everyone," he said as he packed up his things.

Hermione pushed her hair from her face, and scratched at her nose, sighing.

"I know," she said. "I was afraid of that."

He shook his head.

"I'll see you tonight for patrols," he said, left.

Once she was sure she couldn't hear his footsteps anymore, Hermione's shoulders sagged in relief. She'd felt so uncomfortable with him here, it was as if he knew one of her deepest secrets or had walked in on her having a bath. Even though they had not exchanged one harsh word or comment, she still felt on edge. Nothing bad had happened but she couldn't help but think she would regret ever having brought him there.

She stopped by the Gryffindor common room an hour before patrol and found Harry, Ron, and Ginny sitting together by the fire.

"We've been looking everywhere for you," Harry said. Ginny moved aside to give Hermione room to sit.

"I was in the library with Malfoy," Hermione said, dropping her schoolbag to the ground. "Dumbledore's asked us to plan a holiday event."

"What kind?" Ron asked warily. "Another dance?"

"I won't confirm anything until our plan is approved," Hermione said.

"And how's our favorite performing ferret?" Harry asked, grinning.

"The same as usual," she replied. "Quieter, though."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not really. It just makes me wonder if he's mad."

"He's *always* mad."

"True," Ginny said. "So we were planning to sneak to the kitchens tonight and wheedle Dobby into giving us whatever meringues were left over from dinner."

"Er... why?"

“Because they were delicious, and I want to save one to throw at the back of Pansy Parkinson’s head for calling me a cow for eating so many.”

Ron laughed.

“Did you want to come with us?”

“I can’t,” Hermione said. “I have to patrol tonight with Malfoy.”

Unless he’s switched partners again.

“I’ll save some for you, then,” Ginny said. “Doesn’t it get awkward, sometimes, spending so much time with him?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” Hermione asked. “I don’t see him much in our common room, and the patrols aren’t so bad, luckily. But he still goes on about his blood purity nonsense now and then and it makes me want to pull out my teeth.”

“Pull out *his*, and your problems will stop right there if he can’t talk anymore.”

Hermione laughed. “I’ll write home and ask my mum and dad to send me an oral surgery kit of my own. They’d be so pleased.”

When she returned to the common room with ten minutes left before patrol began, she was surprised to find Malfoy at the worktable, asleep on top of a long piece of parchment he had been writing on. Two textbooks lay flat and open in front of him.

Hermione had seen Georgie in passing today after class, and Georgie had mentioned nothing about a change in partners, so she was left to assume that she was back to patrolling with Malfoy. Perhaps he’d meant to, and forgot.

She paused, not knowing what to do. She’d never seen him asleep before, and even though she couldn’t see his face from where she stood, it was still an odd feeling to walk into this.

She went to her room quietly, put her bag away, changed, and washed her face. She took a long drink of water and stepped back into the common room. He was still asleep.

I don’t want to go and have to wake him up...

An idea struck.

She pulled her robes back on, retrieved her bag from her room, and closed the door. She went to the exit, left the door open, turned her back on him, and gritting her teeth, she let her bag drop to the ground. Being full to capacity of books and papers and other things, it made quite the racket. She busied herself pretending to tie her trainers at the coat rack and heard the scrape of a chair, the rustling of parchment.

Good. It had worked.

“It’s time for patrols,” came his voice from over by the table, slightly rasping from sleep.

She straightened and turned, pretended to see him there for the first time.

“Oh, good, you’re here. Let’s get going, then.”

Their route took them close to the Gryffindor tower. Remembering the meringue plan, Hermione was on high alert, wondering if she would see her friends sneaking about tonight.

Malfoy's voice cut into her thoughts.

"I took the draft to Dumbledore. He approved of it, and will be sending us a note tomorrow with the funds we'll have available for the event."

"That was fast."

"He's very eager to make this happen." Malfoy glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "We'll be up to our knees in preparations, and that's on top of everything we've got to do."

"If you didn't like my idea, you could have suggested something else, you know," she said smartly.

"I was of the mind that we should do nothing, but I didn't think the Headmaster would have liked that, much."

"I agree with you, for once."

They turned into another corridor.

"Don't you ever think you take on too much?"

Hermione blinked, almost missing a step, blindsided by his question.

"No, I don't."

He gave her an odd look.

"Really. You don't ever think about... not doing anything?"

"Of course I do. Everyone does. I just like being busy and having things to do. I don't like wasting my time and like to have something to show for everything I do."

"And if it's too much?"

"I take breaks. I see my friends. I spend time alone. I've learned to manage my time well."

"So there's never been an instant where nothing was going right and all you wanted to do was stop?"

She paused.

"In third year, I had something close to that. I was taking too many classes and could barely keep up. But I learned to, and I passed."

He was looking at her strangely again and catching him, she flushed, remembering suddenly the manner in which he had kissed her several weeks ago. She looked away, consciously widening the space between them.

"What about you, then?" She asked. "This is the most involved I've ever seen you at school outside of Quidditch or the Inquisitorial Squad. This must be a change for you."

"I don't like owing large portions of my time to anything," he said. "My time is my time, and I'm loathe to part with it unless it's for something worthwhile. My parents wanted me to

accept the Head Boy position. I didn't really care. But it goes on my record and years from now I get to crow about walking these halls after curfew and planning dances for school. Thrilling, all of it. I worked my ass off for *this*."

"You could have told Dumbledore you didn't want the position anymore."

Malfoy snorted.

"And give up a room to myself? Never mind that. That common room may be nothing like the Slytherin dorms, but at least I get more space and privacy. You wouldn't believe how loudly Zabini snores, and his bed was next to mine."

They lapsed into silence for a while. Malfoy walked ahead to look at something on the floor. Hermione continued at a slightly slower pace, crossing an intersection of corridors when she heard an odd shuffle just behind her.

Something pinched her arm and she jumped, almost crying out in shock. She felt an invisible hand squeeze her arm gently as if to apologize. Her hand was taken by another. She glanced over in Malfoy's direction. He hadn't even noticed and had walked farther off, totally oblivious.

"Harry?" She whispered.

"Hullo," she heard someone whisper, giggling. Was that Ginny?

She felt something squeeze her hand again, and a second later it released her and she felt them move away, probably all crouched under Harry's Invisibility Cloak. She wanted to laugh but didn't, knowing it would catch Malfoy's attention.

There was something in her palm. She opened it and found two slightly squashed drops of blueberry meringue.

6. Scent

The loud ramble and clatter of the students and the dinner utensils filled the air around the large room, laughter and the voices of her schoolmates filled her ears pleasantly. Hermione chewed absently on her steak and kidney pie, watching as Seamus dared Ron to see how many dinner rolls he could fit into his mouth. Harry was looking on with a mix of amusement and concern in his eyes, counting out each roll that was added. He caught Hermione's eye and grinned.

Hermione smiled back and sipped her pumpkin juice, looking further down the Gryffindor table.

Ginny and Michael Corner were in a heated argument, whispering angrily to each other, Neville wasn't eating at all, he'd propped up a thick Herbology volume up on the table, and was reading it very closely, his nose almost touching the pages. He'd mentioned how Professor Sprout had given it to him days ago, and had carried it everywhere since, his eyes glued to its contents. Hermione smiled and looked on. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil seemed to be talking about a certain boy in the Ravenclaw table; they turning to send him coy smiles and flirtatious little waves of their fingers. The boy took one look at them and turned away, shaking his head. Hermione looked to down at her plate to hide her smirk.

The pressure of a hand on her shoulder made her jump. Hermione looked behind her to see who it was.

Cormac McLaggen looked down at her curiously.

"What did you jump for? Did I scare you?"

"No-I was just thinking of something else," she said. He pulled his hand back and she turned to face him. "It's there something I can help you with?"

"I've got a question for you," he said, "but it's too loud to talk here."

"We can step outside for a moment," she suggested, and he agreed.

"I'll be back," she gestured to Harry, who nodded but stared at Cormac rather suspiciously.

Hermione stood and led Cormac outside.

Draco watched as that arrogant Gryffindor followed the Head Girl out of the Great Hall. Unconsciously, the grip on his knife tightened, as he watched the door close behind them. He had never liked that McLaggen bloke. The smug look on his face as he'd placed his hand on the witch's shoulder irked him. Not to mention his shady reputation with the female population of Hogwarts.

Not that I care about what he does with Granger. It isn't my business.

But his eyes continued to follow them until they had left the Great Hall.

"Something on your mind?" Blaise Zabini had dropped down on the bench beside him.

Draco shook his head. "None of your business." He stole a quick glance at the great doors through indifferent eyes, and then back to Blaise, who'd piled his plate high and had begun eating.

"So I've been meaning to ask: what's it like living with Know-It-All Granger?" Blaise asked through bites of his meal. "Has she driven you out yet?"

"She'd be hard-pressed to get me out of this position," Draco said haughtily. "Though I won't say she hasn't tried."

"How so?" Blaise poured himself some water.

"You've seen what she's like in class. Try living with that. I've discovered she has quite the temper."

"That wasn't obvious before? We've all heard her snapping at Potter and Weasley before."

"This is beyond that. We can hardly talk to each other without it turning ugly."

"Well, considering you've got a temper of your own, that's not surprising. You're both hard-headed. And how ugly are we talking, here?"

Draco thought of his hand in her hair, the tenseness of her body as she tried to refuse his kiss.

"We've said some regrettable things, I'll leave it at that."

"You'll excuse me for this, but I still can't believe you were chosen for Head Boy," Blaise said, shaking his head. "We all thought that Justin-Finch Fletchely would get it."

Draco located him at his table, struggling to find a dignified way to eat his pasta.

"If he came up and asked for the position, I'd let him have it."

Granger would like that. He's polite enough. They get on well.

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

"See, you say that but I don't believe it," Blaise was saying, tearing a piece off his dinner roll.

"You're right. She doesn't want me there, but I won't leave just to make her comfortable."

"So you stayed out of spite. You stubborn ass."

Draco smirked. "You'd do the same."

"Oh, naturally."

Blaise focused on eating. Draco scanned the Gryffindor table. Granger was not back yet. He kept his eye on the door as he ate.

Hermione felt Cormac's hand on her back with some discomfort. She wasn't sure how she felt about this; she normally didn't like being touched so familiarly by someone she barely knew, but as the touch didn't seem inappropriate in any way she let it slide.

Cormac turned to her. "You should come with me to Hogsmeade next week."

Hermione looked perplexed. "Oh—I thought this was a school matter."

"What did you think I was going to ask? That I needed help with Transfiguration?" he asked teasingly.

"Well, yes."

He chuckled. "We can fit that in, too, if you like. The Three Broomsticks is a jolly place, we'll have fun."

He smiled and reached out, smoothing his hand over her hair. Again, Hermione bristled at the contact and turned her head away to make a point. Why was everyone always touching her without asking first? He retracted his hand, nonplussed.

"Why ask me?" she asked. "I reckon Parvati would have been glad if you'd asked her. She's always talking about you."

"Parvati's nice, but it's you I like. None of the other girls look half as well as you, and they couldn't come close to catching you in class. They're all too dumb."

Hermione frowned.

"That's not a nice thing to say. You don't have to put someone else down to pay a compliment."

"It's the truth." He laughed. "Don't pretend this is all a surprise, I've seen the way you look at me."

Hermione flushed. "That doesn't mean I fancy you."

"Well, you can still give it a try."

She crossed her arms. "I don't think I want to."

His smile fell slightly. "You think or you know?"

"I'm sure I don't want to," she said firmly, and he stepped away. "Honestly, Cormac, I'm not interested in you like that."

She didn't know what to do, so she held out her hand to shake his. He didn't. Her eyes trailed up to his face, she was surprised to see he looked very displeased.

"I hope we can still be friendly, at least," she said.

"See you in class," he muttered angrily and walked away.

Oh, what a baby.

Hermione rolled her eyes, ignoring the slight hurt she felt and headed toward the Head dorm.

Draco had been writing a Transfiguration paper when she'd walked in, jaw set, eyes wounded and angry. She stomped over to the chintzy armchair and sat down with a huff, drawing her knees under her chin. Such an impulsive, childlike move. It made him want to laugh but his curiosity got the better of him. It was only out of his curious nature that he wanted to know what had happened between her and McLaggen. Nothing else.

"Bad day?" he asked casually over the top of the book he was reading.

Their eyes met for a second and she nodded before turning away, her braid falling over her shoulder. He wanted to ask about McLaggen, but then she would find out that he'd been watching her so he kept his mouth shut and buried his nose back into his book. Within seconds he had managed to immerse himself in the passage he had been reading before she had entered, seeking the information he needed for his paper.

"Malfoy?"

He slung his arm over the back of his chair and turned to face her.

"What?"

He fixed her with a hard stare. She seemed nervous and embarrassed. Her eyes were downcast and she bit her lip as she fiddled with the end of her braid, apparently thinking hard over something but finding no answers. The action brought his attention to her mouth, her lips pink from her teeth biting into them. The sudden and wholly surprising desire to kiss her again flooded through him as he had felt before, and he was too busy thinking about that when he realized she'd asked him something and was staring at him expectantly.

"Hm?" he asked, mentally kicking himself.

Fool.

She looked at him, seeming to have changed her mind. "Never mind."

He sighed, rolling his eyes. "Don't waste my time."

"Sorry." She got up to go to her room and change out of her uniform. She came out of her room a few minutes later, in sweatpants and a long-sleeve loose-fitting shirt, her hair pulled up. Draco had only glanced up, having caught the motion in his peripheral vision, and froze. She was scratching at the crook of her elbow and approached the sink, took one of her mugs and filled it with water.

Draco forced his eyes away from her and made himself focus on his book. He had never seen her in such attire before and found himself transfixed. Though the clothing was not provocative in any way whatsoever, he found he was drawn to the way it suggested at the curves of her body, fueling his imagination. Finished at the sink, she carried her mug back to the armchair she had sat at earlier, her school bag by her side. She settled into the chair, placed the mug on the floor beside her chair, tapped it with her wand to heat it up, and unwrapped a small packet she took out of her bag, dropped a teabag into the mug.

Draco stared, perplexed.

She took a hairpin from her bag and transfigured it into a spoon, which she used to stir the tea. She looked up as she stirred and caught him looking.

“What?”

“*What* are you doing?”

“Making tea.” She gestured to the mug, frowning at him as if he had asked something very stupid.

“What did you put in it? Where’s the kettle?”

“I didn’t feel like going all the way to the kitchens just for a cup of tea when I could make one here. I used a tea bag... you don’t know what those are?”

“I don’t drink much tea, and when I do, it’s usually ready and someone else makes it for me.”

“Ah.” Her tone was dry. “I see.” She continued to stir.

He returned to his book and flipped a page to give the illusion he was actually reading. There was no patrol tonight, luckily. He had planned to work on this Transfiguration assignment and then go to bed but Granger in those clothes, awful as they were, held his attention in a tight grip.

They didn’t speak much for the rest of the night. Around eleven she got up and put her things away, took her mug back to the sink. He got a good view of her pretty bottom as she had her back to him. He bit his tongue and scribbled angrily on his parchment—utter gibberish, but she didn’t know that. By the time he retired, his Transfiguration assignment was illegible and needed to be redone. He didn’t care. Those clothes, so utterly plain, so utterly *Muggle*, were all he could think about. That, and her body in them. She continued to surprise him, and he found he was itching to see what would come next.

It began to snow the next weekend, the excitement of it all drew the students out of the sleepy school in droves, and soon, the grounds were full of enchanted snowballs seeking prey; magically animated snowmen walking about the grounds and an impromptu game of Quidditch between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff using only snowballs, which ended quickly and disastrously as it had not been properly thought out.

More trips to Hogsmeade took place, and the students who were eligible wasted no time in making the trek down to the village, walking merrily through the snow with their friends.

Hermione looked out at the grounds from her perch on the steps of the main entrance. Fat snowflakes drifted lazily down, landing on her hair, blending into the white ground. The cold was delicious even though she was shaking, she adjusted her snug hat and scarf and proceeded to walk about the grounds, looking for a familiar face.

A hard ball of snow hit her shoulder and she gave a small shriek of surprise, quickly looking around to catch who had thrown it. There was no one there, so she walked on, suspicious. Another caught her in the back, and she whirled around, curls flying, to catch the perpetrator. Still no one. Neville and Luna were creating some sort of snow figure nearby, but

she knew it hadn't been them. Everyone else around her was engaged in their own event, no one was looking at her.

Hermione sensed movement behind her, whipped out her wand, and cast a quick fire charm. The snowball that had been seconds away from hitting her vaporized mid-air. She glanced around for the offender, prepared to throw a snowball back.

The muffled sound of clapping brought her attention back up, where Harry and Ron stood, impressed by her skill. "I knew it was you two," she said and gave them both a fierce hug along with a small smack to the side of their heads.

"But it didn't stop you from squealing, now, did it?" Ron asked, grinning. Harry laughed, earning a jab in the ribs from Hermione, who glared at them but ended up laughing anyway. They looped their arms together and began to trudge across the grounds, constantly ducking from the flying debris. A while later they reached Hogsmeade, laughing and chatting merrily as they entered The Three Broomsticks.

Draco looked out at the school grounds from inside the Head Common Room. It had gotten much darker outside, and most of the students had already headed back into the school, weary and cold. He didn't know why he was staring out the window; he'd been standing here for a half-hour, pale eyes glued to the grounds below. Most everyone had come back already, and dinner had ended an hour ago. He had not seen Granger there and deduced she must still be in Hogsmeade, or on her way back.

Running a hand through his hair, he picked up his cup of hot tea with the other and drank, ignoring the pain from the scalding liquid as it ran down his throat. The heat from the cup fogged up the glass and he wiped it away. Much of the school grounds were visible from where he stood, the white sea of snow and darkness of the forest beyond, the grey sky stretched taut over it all, and three small figures moving towards the entrance of the castle. It didn't take too long to figure out who those three were.

Weasley was not fond of hats, apparently. The red of his hair was as bright as fire in the surrounding white. Potter was a little harder to place but Draco recognized him the second he caught sight of his worn and ill-fitting coat.

That only left her. He looked at the third figure and recognized Granger at once, sporting a hat he had seen her create out of yarn. She was running behind Potter and Weasley, they seemed to be racing each other, streaking through the snow, raising their legs high to work through the snow.

Idiots. Did they not notice they were surrounded by snow and ice? The moment he'd finished that thought Granger slipped and fell into a pile of snow. Her curls had escaped from her hat, splaying over her face. The boys rushed back to her, obviously worried, but stood and laughed when they caught sight of her belly heaving with laughter. Her head was thrown back, mouth wide open, and even from the distance he was at, watching through the window, he could see her breath come out in puffs from her lips. Potter helped her up, and the trio slowly resumed their pilgrimage to the castle, more slowly this time.

Draco turned away, finishing the last of his tea. It wasn't as hot now and soothed his burnt tongue. Slowly, he unbuttoned his coat and shrugged it off, draping it over the nearest chair. Pushing the sleeves of his black dress shirt up, he picked up his cup of tea and saucer and walked over to the tiny kitchenette. He pointed his wand at them to clean them out and send them back to the kitchen.

The room was so still. Quiet. Peaceful, but lacking. The flickering of the fire was his only companion. His eyes were on the armchair she seemed to favor above the others and remembered her in those wildly Muggle garments. The very night that had happened, he had fantasized about pulling them off her body, revealing what lay underneath.

He'd been about to go into his room when the door swung open with a muted groan of the hinges and she stepped in, glowing.

Cheeks rosy from the sudden heat of the castle, eyes bright with happiness and with a small skip in her step, she went directly to the coat rack, humming softly to herself. Draco's eyes never left her as she shimmied out of her coat and neatly hung up her scarf, and turned to dust a bit of ice off her boot. She noticed him for the first time as she stood back up and blushed. Draco said nothing. She gave him a polite smile and said 'goodnight' as she walked into her room, shutting the door behind her. He nodded at her in response and turned to face the coat rack, waiting.

When a few minutes had passed and she had not emerged, he walked silently to the midpoint of the room, looked at the gap at the bottom of her door. Her lights were off. She must be sleeping or taking a bath. He grew bold.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached the coatrack and grabbed her scarf, still slightly warm from her body. He buried his nose into the soft fabric and inhaled.

Her scent was so intoxicating, how had he not noticed before? It made his head feel light and pleasant, sending a delicious thrill down his body as he rubbed the knitted fabric against his skin. Old books and lavender and jasmine, that was what Granger smelled like, and it was wonderful. Just right for her. Shivers ran down his body as he inhaled again, letting his mind wander despite his better judgment. For just this once.

He imagined her hands, those clever, perfect hands, running up and down his body and across his skin. Imagined them running through his hair, over his lips, nipples, and pictured her fingers ghosting over his cock, running up and down its length. He thought of her lovely eyes, wide and brown, staring back at him in defiance and fear, those lovely pink lips he so wanted to taste again. He'd only had one small taste of her and somehow he had become addicted—he wanted to kiss her; *devour* her. It was almost frightening. He'd never experienced want like this before.

What have you done to me, witch?

The fire popped loudly from the other side of the room and he jumped, startled into releasing the knitted garment, breathing hard. Her door to his right beckoned to him and with pleasure, he envisioned her in her bed, wondered if she was wearing that particular set of Muggle pajamas again. He was erect, aching for the owner of that scarf.

This is too much.

Draco looked at the fallen scarf with a mixture of disgust and lust, and kicked it away from him with one fluid motion of his foot, sending it flying over to a chair across the room. He needed either a cold shower or a good wank, and fast. She had to get out of his system. He never should have let her in.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat, trying not to glance to her right. The Muggle Studies Professor had his back turned to the class, helping a student with their work. Cormac was sitting next to her, cold and unfriendly. She'd tried to greet him when she saw him, but he'd only ignored her and looked away. Hermione was mildly upset, but also annoyed. He was acting like Ronald had acted in third year when the whole Scabbers ordeal had happened.

All this just because she'd turned him down! Had he gone about it in a less insulting manner, her answer might have been different, but it was unlikely. A small crease appeared between her brows as she thought. She didn't consider herself beautiful but she knew she wasn't horribly ugly either, and besides, brains mattered more than looks! It was her intelligence that she prized most. What if she was plain? She would still have her smarts so she wouldn't care. Cormac had fancied her only because she happened to be attractive as well as intelligent, and that was what bothered her.

The bell rang at that moment, startling her, and she hurried to pack up her things. Cormac stood and brushed past her to leave the room. Hermione shook her head.

They were heading down to the dungeons again to patrol, the ancient castle sat eerie and dark, groaning ominously down in its depths. The only sounds were those of their feet and the flickering flames of the torches along the wall. They walked in silence, and when they reached the stairs he went first, too lost in his thoughts to allow her to pass first. Unfortunately, she didn't notice for she was also lost in thought, her brain entirely focused on her Ancient Runes essay which she was re-translating inside her head. As consequence of not paying attention, she skipped a step and fell into him, bringing him down to the ground.

Draco had been halfway down the steps when a curious scuffling noise caught his attention and he turned around only to have something collide with him so roughly the air was knocked out of his lungs in a harsh groan. He was surprised, monumentally so, to find himself on the ground with a gasping Granger lying flush against him, her palms clenched against his chest. It took him a moment to realize she had fallen down the steps, his back hurt from having slammed onto the ground.

Granger herself seemed not to have realized what had happened just yet, she was still gasping for breath and her body was tense, pressed deliciously against his—this distracted him from the pain, at least. Quickly enough, her eyes cleared and she realized she perceived him underneath her, and those beautiful brown eyes widened and her lips parted. He fought to contain his grin as she began to splutter and apologize, touching his head, checking for an injury. He ignored her ramblings, only focused on her body on top of his. The weight of her on him, the way she was unknowingly straddling him, her thigh brushing against his crotch every now and then, causing the lightest yet most delightful friction. He could feel himself begin to harden, and it took great effort for him to think of something else. He wanted to

throw her down beneath him and shag her senseless. But she was still apologizing, one hand on her mouth, embarrassed. He had to get her off of him before he did something he would regret later.

He reached up, caught her wrists and she finally ceased her noise, looking at him with concern.

“I’m fine. Get off me.” She visibly relaxed at his statement, but immediately tensed again when she saw the position they were in. She blushed hard as she jerked her wrists away, and stood, not meeting his eye.

He stood up, and silently evanescoed the dust of his suit. She still wasn’t looking at him, just fixing her hair where her curls had escaped from the bobby pins she’d stuck into her hair. She caught him looking at her, a faint pink staining her cheeks, but she didn’t look away, and though he’d been caught by her action, he blinked and walked on, fully absorbed in the scope of her.

She hummed again that night, but softly, so he could hardly hear it. Several songs he didn’t recognize, but they sounded cheerful-or they would have, had not the echoing given them a warped effect.

He watched her the whole time, recalling how her body had felt. With every day that passed, he found himself thinking of the strange witch more and more and he would have been alarmed if he paid any attention to his thoughts. Since their agreement some months ago there had not been a single incident between them and he knew to change that was not a good idea, but as much as he tried he could not deny to himself that he wanted her.

Her, of all people! It was irony at its finest, it was laughable, he would have laughed until his voice was gone if the matter weren’t so serious.

The girl was like an infection—she was the needle and he had pricked himself with it—now she was in his veins, coursing through him with every breath and it was both exhilarating and terrifying that she had poisoned him so. What was he going to do now that he was stricken?

Completely unaware of the tormented thoughts of her peer, the Head Girl walked on until they were both back inside their common room and she bid him goodnight. Suddenly full of an out of place anger, Draco muttered his reply and shut himself off in his room, and lied on his bed, stroking himself, thinking of how her body had felt on top of him. Release came easily. He wished he had kissed her. He was dying to taste her again.

7. Bird Watching

I don't own Harry Potter.

The snow outside fell thickly, in sheets, muffling whatever odd sounds that threatened to break the cushioned silence of the Hogwarts grounds. The sun was halfway gone beneath the horizon, the sky darkening rapidly. Warm and tucked safely inside the Head Student dorm, Hermione sat curled up by the window in her favorite armchair, knitting a hat made of a deep plum yarn. Her hair was loose, fanning over her shoulders and chest. The remaining sunlight catching in her dark brown hair made it glow; making each strand look like it was made of a honeyed blonde.

He wanted to pull it and hear her scream.

Her expression was serene, absorbed in her craft. Her hands moved quickly, precisely, working the yarn between her needles with the ease and efficiency of a machine. In her mind, she went over a list of things to be done before the week. Her thoughts were far-flung from the Head Boy who sat at the other end of the room watching her stealthily, simmering in dark thoughts.

His gaze traveled slowly down her form—she wore wearing Muggle clothing. A simple dark green knit jumper and dark jeans. She'd been wearing tall boots but had pulled them off to sit cross-legged in the armchair, and he had been almost taken aback by her striped and multicolor socks.

It was a half-hour before dinner; he had been sitting at their table trying to write a letter to his mother but had gotten distracted and now he was watching her. He had been for a while now. As insidiously as a siren she demanded his attention whenever she was near, and who was he to resist the sweet call? Was he even strong enough to? The answer had proved time and time again to be in the negatives. Little by little, she had drawn him in, and his resistance almost gone, he continued to succumb.

His eyes strayed to her again. Piece by piece he had been unwrapping the enigma that was Granger, and the more he discovered, the deeper he wanted to dive.

What had he learned from all his observations?

That she was remarkably similar to a bird: surrounded by an air of delicacy, but strong and extremely intelligent. He was always fascinated by her hair—her heavy curls danced with the smallest shake of her head, how it framed her face when she wore it down. The way she walked, how she moved her hands—captivating. Her laugh had charmed him utterly. She didn't really laugh in his presence—not real laughter, more often she would snort in derision at him or exhale sharply if he tried to make a joke she didn't approve of. But during meals, and sometimes during classes when she was in more favorable company, she would laugh freely and happily. Every time he heard it he wanted to capture it as soon as it left her white

throat and store it for his ears only. He knew sometimes she could tell he was watching her; as any bird would when it realizes itself in the company of a stranger, she would tense up and freeze. Draco found her unease delicious.

Being the powerhouse she was, she always walked quickly and with purpose, her face straight and focused, but she was still approachable and often asked for advice and help, while most students tended to avoid Draco and his cold, removed demeanor. But at times, when she got too quiet, he would glance at her and find this serene, dreamy look on her face, like she had let her guard down and allowed herself to loosen. He had learned that when she was in this state, unfocused and unoccupied, she was more likely to be open to conversation.

And there was still her music.

He had found out one morning that she liked to whistle, and that she was rather good at it. She had done it softly while she had searched for something in her room, the door wide open, and he had found himself with the morbid mental image of a human wearing a bird's skin. She whistled, she hummed—he was sure she sang out loud only when she was sure he was not in the dorm. From what he had heard, he knew she had the sweetest, purest sound he was sure he would ever hear. No being could make music like she. The sounds leaving her lips moved him so much that he often longed to join in but he always held back, letting the little bird sing her song. Even when she was not there with him she was always there in her song. Wherever he went he fancied he could hear her, her music dancing around his ears, as if daring him to catch her.

It unsettled him, that he wanted her. He wanted to rake his hands through her curls, to kiss her, every part of her and claim her as his. Wanted to hear it from her own mouth, the blissful confirmation. Sometimes her voice haunted his dreams. Shaking his head lightly, he tore his gaze away from her and looked out the window. Heavy snow was falling, framing the diamond panes on the window behind Granger. Would it be too much to hope for a storm?

Minutes passed slowly in the moment of peace. The clicking of her aluminum needles lulled him and he closed his eyes, folded his arms and leaned back into his chair, stretching his legs out before him. Before he knew it he was asleep.

Hermione heard a soft snore and looked up from her knitting, her concentration broken. She was surprised to see Malfoy was sitting at their table, dead asleep. She peered behind her through the window and saw the darkening sky.

Hermione checked the time and put down her work, flexing her hands. Dinner would be starting soon, and if she left now she might have enough time to go to the Gryffindor Tower and catch the others before they left. She tucked her nearly finished hat into her fabric shoulder bag and slowly walked over to the sleeping Slytherin.

He looks so peaceful, she thought. Should I wake him?

His face was relaxed and calm, his pale lashes resting on his cheekbones and if she looked close enough, she could barely make out the lines on his forehead from all that sneering and frowning he did. His chest rose and fell slowly, a strand of his blond hair was falling into his eyes.

She crept closer, unsure of what to do.

Things had been going well recently, considering the circumstances. Malfoy kept a frosty distance much of the time, except for when they had duties to perform, but she'd didn't quite mind. Patrols were uneventful but productive—he still insisted on talking through most of them, which she supposed she didn't mind. There had been no fights in a while now, and Hermione had to be satisfied with that, though she realized he still had never apologized for that kiss.

Well, I'm not bringing it up again. It was too uncomfortable, and she had put it out of mind, thinking to herself that his improved behavior was a sort of unacknowledged apology. It had been a one-off. Tensions had been high, and she had quickly learned that Malfoy did not know how to manage his anger very well. In some very stupid way, perhaps he *had* been trying to shut her up, as he had said. She didn't buy it, but it was the only plausible explanation she could find as to why he'd done it at all.

That there were fewer arguments between them was nothing to gloat over—neither was still fully comfortable with the other and Hermione often sensed an anger bubbling inside him that was directed at her. She often felt him watching her and didn't know what to make of it, but as long as there was no repeat of the kiss she managed to ignore it just fine.

He spent more time in their dorm than she did. Hermione went to the Gryffindor common room as often as she could when she was not busy studying, preferring the company of her closest friends over Malfoy, who usually greeted her coldly, as if he resented her presence there, which he probably did.

They had met with Dumbledore again, and he'd been delighted to hear of their 'progress'. Hermione didn't have the heart to tell him how things really were. Even if they weren't as bad as they'd been the first few days, there was little to no chance of any of it changing. Preparations for their holiday event were still underway but so far everything was going smoothly. Malfoy may have called himself lazy once, but he was doing his part of the work and she found she was impressed.

She went to her room to put her things away and pull her boots back on. She glanced at Malfoy again.

His dream must not have been pleasant. He was frowning now, small beads of sweat formed on his forehead. His breathing had quickened, and he began to mumble incoherently, something she couldn't quite understand, but it sounded urgent. She frowned.

"Malfoy."

He couldn't hear her. She came closer, put one hand on his shoulder.

"Malfo—"

His grey eyes suddenly flew open and without thinking he snatched her wrist, launched himself out of his chair and pressed her down backward against the table, snarling. It happened so quickly she couldn't even cry out as her back slammed into the table, but she knew there would be bruises later. Her back throbbed with pain and she gasped, trying to find breath. He was panting, pinning her down, his eyes still clouded with sleep and rage and whatever he had been dreaming about, and in her alarm, she finally found her voice.

With her free hand, she pushed at him. He looked down, frowning, still not fully there.

“Wake up, Malfoy.”

He froze at the sound of her voice, eyes clearing, and he looked down at her with surprise and anger, his lips parted slightly. Backing away, he led her from the table, never letting go of her. His grip had gentled around her wrist.

She was regarding him with wide eyes, but they held more concern than fear.

Damn Gryffindor. He took a deep breath and made himself let her go. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t know how your Muggle parents raised you, but you shouldn’t bother someone who’s sleeping.” His voice was a little raspy from sleep but as serious as ever.

Hermione crossed her arms. “It looked like you were having a nightmare. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Malfoy appeared a little taken aback, frowning at her as if she’d just uttered nonsense. “What do you care if I’m having a bad dream?”

She faltered.

“My rules still stand,” he said. “Remember those? Keep to them and we’ll have no more incidents.”

“Right,” she said flatly. “I forgot. Next time I’ll let you suffer.”

The side of his mouth lifted.

“Now you’re getting it.”

Hermione shook her head. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. I’ll remember that for next time.” She gave a mocking curtsy and headed to the door. “Dinner starts in three minutes. And I’ll thank you not to treat me like your inferior. Regardless of our lineage, we both have magic in our blood and that makes us equal.”

The door shut behind her.

Malfoy stared after her, shrugging on his robe.

‘It looked like you were having a nightmare...’

Exactly what had he dreamt about, then? The dream had been forgotten the second he’d touched her so it was useless trying to remember now. Picking up his letter, he scribbled a last line or two, stood and abruptly left the Head Common Room, heading towards the Owlery.

“Letter to your mother?” Blaise had joined him, striding quickly to catch up. Draco nodded.

They climbed up the narrow steps to the small tower. There was a young couple canoodling by the door, staring wide-eyed at him as he stepped into the open tower.

“Leave.” Draco snapped. They fled.

“You’ve got such a way with words,” Blaise said, chuckling.

Draco shrugged. He motioned to a pristine white owl; it hopped down and he attached the letter to its leg.

"To my mother. You know where she is," he murmured. The owl gave a hoot and took off. He watched it leave, sweeping his eyes along the snowy scenery.

"You've been spending an awful lot of time with the Mudblood," Blaise commented, stroking an owl perched beside him. "Haven't seen much of you lately."

"Obviously, considering we live in the same space. You shouldn't even be complaining. You've been far too busy with Pansy from what I hear."

Blaise grinned, shrugging. "I wasn't complaining. How are you two getting along?"

"Better." He remembered the feel of pushing her against the table, her wrist in his hand, the look of shock on her face. "Slightly."

"That's a marked improvement from what you said last time I asked."

"Did Dumbledore send you?" Draco asked, irritated. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just checking to make sure you haven't lost your head, yet. She hasn't got your arm behind your back to say there's been no trouble?"

"No," Draco said. "Everything's fine. Really."

Blaise leaned against a railing. "Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

Draco gave him a look.

"I'm sincerely asking."

Draco looked away.

"I think living with her's poisoned me, somehow."

"How, you're going to defect and join Gryffindor?" Blaise snickered at his joke. Draco gave him a cold look. "Sorry."

"She's gotten in my head," Draco said.

"I reckon she's been there since first year, since you wouldn't stop complaining about her. Just think of an annoying song and it should go away."

"It's not that," Draco said impatiently. "I want her."

"Oh, *that*. Color me shocked. She's pretty, isn't she? Have you tried making a move?"

Her lips against his, a whimper crushed between them. The explosion of pain in his balls the day after, when she had gotten her revenge.

"I kissed her."

Blaise's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"It didn't end well."

To put it mildly. And now you're like a dog desperate for a treat. Pathetic.

Draco closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, feeling the cold air surround him, shaking his head. The images came suddenly, of her body moving over his, her hands touching his face in concern, the day he'd kissed her when she'd grabbed at his arm. The day he'd slammed her into the wall just outside of Dumbledore's office right after she'd slapped him. The dreams she had shown up in thereafter.

And now you wait and listen for her just to make sure she isn't with anyone else.

Every night, in your bed. Every morning, when you hear her wake.

"Badly enough that you'll never try again, or are you just giving her space until things may have changed?"

"She's a Mudblood, Blaise. I would sully myself by fucking her. She's pretty enough, but not worth the trouble."

Blaise didn't seem bothered. "I've done it before. I know my mother has had several Muggle lovers. No one of our kind seems to really care. Just as long as you don't marry her or get her pregnant. Hell, even Pansy's done it, and you know how her family is. Then again, your parents might have a different opinion of that sort of stuff, but as long as they don't find out and you're careful, it shouldn't matter. It's just sex."

"And torturing someone with a Crucio is just tickling them with magic."

"Do you think she's thought of it?"

"I *know* she hasn't. I'd put a hefty sum on her choosing a Blast-Ended Skrewt over me, and I'd do the same."

Blaise laughed. "I'd forgotten about those awful things. Still, I don't believe you. I think if she came to your door and asked you'd jump at the chance."

"She'd only ever do that if someone used an Imperius curse on her."

"Maybe if you weren't such a troll she'd actually consider it," Blaise said, snickering. Draco stared at him until he stopped laughing.

"Well, if she ever comes to her senses, be sure to woo her quickly before Potter or Weasley snatch her up."

It's a surprise they haven't already, Draco thought. *A witch like her...*

"If your mission goes well, perhaps the Dark Lord will gift her to you. He's done it before."

Draco stared out at the mountains and forests surrounding the school, not really taking it in. His mission. Voldemort had tasked him with it that past summer, to kill Dumbledore in whatever way he chose. He'd almost forgotten about it, with all the recent events and all. He had been too distracted with Granger and that had cost him months in which he could have made lots of progress, seeing as he hadn't even started yet. He would have to work very quickly now to make up for it.

The skin on his left forearm seemed to burn slightly as he thought of this, and he unconsciously pressed his arm against a pillar that held up an arch in the tower, wincing

slightly as the cold bit through his clothing.

Granger as a gift... The idea was too tempting. He ignored the sudden flood of images that rushed forward. He would be able to have her all to himself, whether she wanted him or not. He would show her her place.

He would have to work carefully to ensure success if he was to ask for her. The Dark Lord did not reward failure. When presented with the task at first, Draco had found himself a little unhappy over it. He had wanted to complete his education at Hogwarts. At the Manor, his father and his friends had trained him for the better part of a year leading up to the presentation of the task so he would have new skills to help him achieve it, and thanks to that he had grown significantly stronger so he knew it was not an impossible task. Not if he did it really well. He hadn't balked at being told he must murder. He would not balk now, not even considering who his target was, especially considering it might win him something he really wanted.

"Then I'll make sure he has reason to do it again," Draco said.

Blaise nodded. "You have my help if you need it."

"I will," Draco said, his eyes far away, already working on his scheme.

"Hermione, why's McLaggen glaring daggers at you? Is something wrong?" Ron spoke softly over Hermione's shoulder as she reclined in her armchair with her battered copy of *Hogwarts, a History* on her lap.

They were in the Gryffindor Common Room, sitting by the fire as usual. It was late and there were only a small handful of people still hanging about, not wanting to sleep yet.

Hermione looked over to where Ron was staring, and sure enough, Cormac, sitting on a table by the entrance looked away not a second later, scowling at the stairs leading to the boys' dormitories, aware he had been caught.

"Not really, he only asked me out and I said no. I suppose he still isn't over it," Hermione said, flipping a page. Harry was dozing in a chair opposite her, glasses slightly askew, pieces of parchment slowly sliding off his lap.

"McLaggen asked you out?" Ron gaped at her, blue eyes wide and disbelieving, but snapped his mouth shut at the glare she sent him over the top of her book. He glanced back to the subject of their conversation, whose jaw twitched with anger.

"I don't like this. Why's he just sitting there staring at you? Maybe Harry and I should talk to him." Ron turned to look at Cormac again, his fists loosely clenched.

Hermione closed her book. "All he's doing is sitting there, Ron. It's fine. If he's staring, then I can't feel it and I don't care. Besides, I can take care of myself and you know it. I don't want you and Harry worrying about this when you've both clearly got a load of assignments to work on instead."

She elbowed Harry awake, who grunted and blinked blearily at his unfinished assignment.

“McLaggen’s doing it again,” Ron said to him. Harry frowned and peered over to where McLaggen had been sitting, but he had tired of the trio glaring at him and had his back to them, heading into the boys’ dormitories.

“If it makes you uncomfortable, Hermione, we’ll talk to him,” Harry said.

“It’s really fine,” she said, gathering her things. “But I do appreciate the sentiment. I’ve got to go, goodnight!”

Tired, she let her mind fall quiet as she made her way to her dorm, glad that she and Malfoy were not scheduled for patrol that night. She said the password and took a few steps inside. It was pitch black inside, which was normal, but what was not normal was the way the fire didn’t start and the lights didn’t come on a second later as they always did when someone entered.

“Odd,” she said to herself.

Hermione stumbled twice before setting her hand down on the table, which she bumped into in the darkness. The common room was so dark her eyes hurt as they frantically moved around, seeking light. She couldn’t even see her own hands in front of her. She put her bag down on the floor where she guessed the coatrack was and with her foot pushed it out of the way, withdrawing her wand from her robe.

“Lumos.”

Nothing. She frowned at her wand. Why had that not worked? What was going on here?

“Lumos!”

Still no result.

Malfoy was either asleep or not here. Was this a prank of his?

She startled badly, shrieking as she finally caught the silhouette of a man standing by the window, the weak light from outside outlined his form. He wasn’t facing her, that much she could tell. Rather, he was staring down, out into the grounds; his left arm braced over his head, leaning on the wooden frame of the window.

“Evening,” came Malfoy’s voice.

“Gods, you scared me,” she said, clutching at her heart. Inwardly she cursed herself for sounding so afraid. “Why is it so dark in here? Why aren’t the lights working? Have you done something?”

“Our good friend Peeves apparently found more contraband items and decided to test them out here. I walked in and found him using those Weasley twin products.”

“Fantastic,” Hermione grumbled. “Which products were they?”

“Peeves wasn’t generous to share the information. I went to Filch and told him what was going on. According to him, Peeves has hit the Ravenclaw common room as well. He says it’s called Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and he hasn’t figured out how to fix it yet. I suspect he just didn’t want to help.”

He sounded cold and detached, as always, which didn't surprise her. But there was something else there. A slight strain to his voice, like he was in some small amount of pain, or was holding himself back from doing something. It set her on edge.

"Well, I'll go to him again and complain," Hermione said angrily. "How does he expect us to get on without light?"

"He won't be in his office, Granger. He's probably laughing what's left of his hair off somewhere."

Malfoy had turned from the window and approached her. Hermione found it very hard to see him the further he strayed from the window—what little outside light they were getting from the night sky lost its hold on his silhouette.

"He was helpful enough to warn that these effects could last until tomorrow since Peeves used so much."

Hermione sighed.

"Fine. This better have lifted by morning." She pocketed her wand and glanced at him—to where she thought he was. "How long have you been here in the dark?"

"Not long."

She jumped when his voice came from close behind her. He laughed quietly. His cold breath stirred her hair.

"Does Dumbledore know about this?" She asked.

"The Headmaster is out on undisclosed business. He's got a neat little sign on his door." He inhaled, a little more deeply than he would have needed to, seeing as he was standing just behind her. Hermione felt the fine hairs on her arms prickle.

"What, do you think he used a dung bomb, too?" She asked, not knowing what to say.

He took a step forward and his solid body was pressing into hers just so slightly from behind. Gooseflesh erupted on her skin, and suddenly she felt how cold it was in the room with the fire gone. She was sure she would have been able to see her breath had the light been restored.

Hermione quickly turned to face him, walking backward slowly, hoping she had gone in the right direction, to where the door of her room was. In the blatant silence of the room, she could hear, almost *feel* his muffled footsteps on the carpet. She couldn't see him but she was damned if she was wrong. He was following her.

Perhaps if she didn't acknowledge... whatever he was doing he would give up.

"I'm going to bed now, Malfoy."

Soon as I find that blasted door, she grimaced. Hermione inched backward, reaching out behind her to the wall. If she found the wall, she could navigate herself to her room.

His voice came from the surrounding darkness, "Suit yourself, Granger, provided you can *find* your room."

Was that a threat? What is up with him?

Hermione shivered, creeping along with the dark as she narrowly avoided some heavy object. Felt like a trunk, or a potted plant. Hermione could feel him getting closer, her heart sped up, hands shook, and just as she tried to turn in a different direction, her feet got tangled in something long and slightly cold on the floor. With a small gasp, she fell, landing on her side on the carpet. Pain shot up her left arm and through her shoulder, making her drop her wand somewhere on the carpet with a soft thud. Hermione groaned. Fighting to hold back tears, she scooted backward, feeling around for her wand as she felt him kneel down in front of her.

“Are you hurt?” Came his voice.

She felt his hands wrap around her stockinged ankles and jumped, defensively kicking out at him, trying to shake his hands and the blasted object that had made her fall off.

“What are you *doing*?”

He cursed. “Damn it, Granger. I’m only trying to *help*.”

It sure didn’t seem like he was trying to help, though, because as he finished his sentence he tightened his grip around her ankles and yanked her closer to him. Hermione slid on her backside, reaching out with her hands to shove his hands away.

“I’m fine, I don’t *need* help—” she pawed at his hands, infuriated by the low chuckle that escaped his throat. She swiped at the back of his hands with her nails and heard a hiss of pain before she was lying back down on the floor with Malfoy pinning her arms and legs onto the floor with his own body.

“I said let go!” her voice was high and shrill but she didn’t care so long as he got well away from her.

Her heart raced, her skin crawled. She did not like this intrusion, not at all. Twisting and shoving, she tried to get the wizard off of her, but that was a daunting task. He was simply too heavy; his strength was greater than her own, something she had been forced to learn too many times, and did not care to be reminded of again.

He dragged the back of his wounded hand over her cheekbones, smearing a line of his own blood over her skin. She twisted her face away from his grasp, trying to bite down on his fingers as they brushed slowly over her lips.

“Damn you, you silly bint. I was only trying to help and look what you’ve done. Couldn’t put your pride aside for one moment, could you?” he said coolly at her as he reached down between their bodies, and never mind the fact that his hands were trembling from the desire to touch everything on the way down.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but exhaled sharply as she felt his cold hand trail down, mere millimeters from her robes. She began to struggle again, words coming out in jumbled heaps.

“No-What are you doing! Get your hands off!”

Her hand connected with his jaw, pushing him away, fingernails digging into his cheek. Draco swore and untangled the scarf from her legs. She was still thrashing, trying to kick out

at him, but stopped once he leaned back over and dropped the scarf onto her chest.

“Is that my scarf?” she whispered, trying to reach out for it.

“Be more careful with your things, will you, Granger?” He felt no need to explain what her scarf had been doing on the floor in the first place. He stood, brushed himself off, and though she had not expected it, reached back down, grasped her hand, and helped her stand.

Her heart was still racing.

“Go to bed.”

He walked away. Hermione heard him enter his room, the door closed behind him. Suddenly, almost like a miracle, the light came. There was a *woosh* and the fire came to life in the hearth. Hermione winced and screwed her eyes shut as the force of the light blinded her momentarily. She vaguely heard the fire crackle, as if it had been going all along.

In an embarrassed rush, Hermione threw her scarf at his door. “That wasn’t funny, Malfoy!”

She was met with nothing but silence.

8. Touch

I don't own Harry Potter.

Draco walked through the dark halls, the sound of his footsteps echoing loudly around him. The hour was late, the corridors deserted and dark in their newfound emptiness, the atmosphere seemed heavy. Not a soul lingered in sight, all the students were in bed and even Filch had retired to his quarters by now.

Draco pushed a hand through his hair and walked a little faster, his feet charmed not to make a sound. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion, his head ached, and his feet hurt from standing for so long, from staying up all through the night but it was necessary in order for him to not be seen around here.

All week he had been thinking about his task and trying to find a way to do it. His plan had to be foolproof. It had to work. He'd thought and thought and thought and as if by luck remembered the Room of Requirement. Potter's Dumbledore fanatics group had met there in secret for the better part for months, undetectable and if what they had said about the room was true, it might be able to help him. Draco had gone to the common room after dinner and then to patrol with Granger. His mind on the Room, he hadn't said much and neither had Granger, who was still miffed about the incident with the scarf in the darkened room. She had not been overly angry about it but he knew he had taken a liberty, and if he had caught her at a bad time she might have ended it all then and there. He couldn't let that happen yet. Not when things were getting so interesting.

He'd found the old room extremely useful—in particular, an old wardrobe that he knew he could fix for his mission. It matched one he had seen at Borgin and Burke's a long time ago, and had brought up a once-insignificant memory where he had heard Marcus Flint mention that he had been trapped in that cabinet once and that he could see and hear what was happening in its twin on the other side. Draco found that very compelling and decided he would test it out for himself and make use of it. The thing was badly damaged, however. It would take some time, perhaps months, just to repair the damage and tweak it for his purposes. A daunting task for a student, but Draco had faith in his abilities and knew he was capable of accomplishing it.

Upon reaching the portrait he muttered the password and stepped inside to a dark common room. It had been a week since the incident of the light-less room. A week since he had last touched her and in the days that followed he had been craving his next fix.

Lost in thought, he absently ran his fingers over the fading red scratches on his left hand she had given him and walked over to her door, listening intently. He could hear nothing but the crackling fire and that was satisfying enough, to know she was there and not with other company, whoever it might be.

Jealousy was becoming a problem. Draco loathed seeing her sit with her two friends. With them, she was vibrant, happy, truly herself—and then when she came back to him it was like she put a mask over that side of herself. All he got was the no-nonsense Granger, the one who had stopped saying good morning and goodnight, the one who smiled only if he made a comment she planned to tear down. He knew she sensed his hostility sometimes and tried to keep it under constraint, he engaged her in conversation now and then but she didn't have much interest, and if he pressed for more she would look at him with shrewd, analytic eyes and he stopped for fear of being transparent, and she would take refuge in the library soon after. Could she sense his plan for her? Was he not being careful enough? So much paranoia. Draco was not a patient person, and all this waiting was going to wear him thin. He was used to getting what he wanted right away. This was new to him. He did not like to wait.

He had already watched her in secret at the library once. Just to see what she did. Nothing remarkable happened, but he walked away with the sense that he had unwittingly taken something from her, and that like with the other incidents between them, he felt not a jot of remorse.

Her friends did not deserve her. She cared deeply about them, evidenced in the way she was always giving advice and reprimanding them when they were not at their best, which was just about every day. Weasley, the laziest of the trio, rolled his eyes at her and often wheedled her into fixing his work for him. Draco hated that she always relented and then Weasley would thank her and go back to eating or lollygagging around. Then two days later he would make some rude comment towards her and she would tell him off and end up in the dormitory, shut up in her room. It aggravated Draco to no end that her fights with Weasley affected her so much. He remembered having seen her sobbing at the end of their row during the Yule Ball in fourth year. She had looked radiant and devastatingly sad that her night had been ruined.

Why do you care about that nobody? He had thought, rolling his eyes. *He's not worth your tears or your time.*

The ugliness of that row had convinced him the trio was forever broken. But to his continual astonishment and annoyance, she remained friends with Weasley.

Potter, on the other hand, defended her and clearly listened to her, though sometimes he did it grudgingly. Draco saw a trust between him and Granger that they did not share with Weasley, though it was obvious the two males were closer with each other when she was not around. There were also all those rumors that had been going on since Fourth year, around the time of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. All the articles in the Daily Prophet had had some mention about Potter's supposed romance with her for *months*. After the third week of it, Draco had refused to read that rag until the tournament ended and the articles ditched the romance and began to scream about Cedric Diggory and all the nasty business that had happened at the end of that term.

Now, the Daily Prophet was pure tripe, the whole lot of it, but they were accurate in putting a marker on Potter and Granger's relationship. They had something, those two, and he knew it, though most likely the two didn't know it yet themselves. He saw the way Potter looked at her sometimes, with an affectionate look on his face that Draco had never seen before. He'd seen them hold hands on a number of occasions, and Granger just *loved* to hug him.

He supposed he would rather have Granger fall for Potter than a moron like Weasley, but truth be told he would have her fall for no one. She would not belong to anybody that wasn't him. Nobody else came close to deserving her.

If it weren't for her, Potter and Weasley would have had a rough time of it hanging on in school. That she had devoted so much time and effort to save their arses spoke well of her, but he wondered sometimes if she only stayed with them because she had no one else to go to if she finally decided she had had enough.

Hell, he had done it to Crabbe and Goyle and he was better off for it. What point was there to keep them around when he had grown stronger and learned to defend himself better? There was no further need for them so he went on his way happily and they remained stagnant and clueless. Draco had no group of constant friends (aside from Blaise and sometimes Pansy) and didn't want one. He preferred solitude much of the time but never said no to an eager witch or some conversation from certain individuals of his House.

The dorm he shared with Granger still housed their tension. It fluctuated constantly, especially on days he couldn't control himself and created another incident, such as the one with the scarf. He himself was often in a foul mood; his desire for her and his forcing himself to keep a distance (and usually failing) being the leading cause. Even when they managed to get along there was still strain in their behavior towards each other—she, striving to keep cool-headed and civil; he, fighting the constant urge to kiss her.

Most mornings she got up much earlier than him. She had a habit of humming to herself when getting ready. He would wake to the sound of it every time; the running of the water and her voice slightly above it—faint, but comforting. At times he found himself thinking she did it on purpose, just to mess with him. She had to know the effect she had on him.

This thought drove him to twist the knob and open her door as quietly as possible. There was the slightest creak—he froze, waited, and when she continued to slumber he entered slowly, taking off his shoes by the door.

The room was semi-lit by a fiery red glow emanating from the fire, illuminating the young woman sleeping soundly on the four-poster bed set in front of the fireplace. Greedily, his pale eyes raked over her form; over her lashes resting against her cheekbones, her straight, perky nose, those pink lips brushing against her pillow with every breath she took. The curve of her hip, her body was tangled in the thick crimson duvet, her legs jutted out from underneath, hands tucked underneath her pillow. Dark brown curls had been tied up into a messy bun, though errant curls poked out, framing her face and wilting down to her neck.

Draco stood and stared, entranced, as she stretched and turned, her back now facing him. She gave a sigh so soft it was nearly swallowed by the sounds of the fire. He closed the space between himself and her bed, and shrugged off his jumper and shirt, ripped off his tie, and sent them by magic to his room, along with his shoes. Taking care not to disturb her, he crawled onto her bed and she stirred, frowning slightly as she began to wake.

Quickly, he brought his wand out and spelled her into a deep sleep, watching as she became limp and sank back down onto her bed almost lifelessly. He reached out, lean muscles rippling, and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her flush against him. The heat of her body against his made him shudder. Already his groin was stiff—her head burrowed into his chest, lips grazing his collarbone. He shuddered again, a jolt of pleasure ran down his body,

and brought her even closer, locking his strong legs around hers, and wrapping her own arms around his neck. She gave another little sigh and went still again, her warm breath seeming to penetrate his skin.

The contact...

Finally.

How good it felt. He ran his hands down her arms, dipped under her covers with bated breath, and lifted them up to cover himself as well. Her skin pebbled at the rush of cool air from the movement. She stirred again in her sleep and shifted.

“Shhh...”

Draco’s hand traveled down her waist, up that glorious hip, and down that slope of thigh. His hand came back up, groped her bottom, his fingers digging into her flesh. Whether he was too rough or not he didn’t know—she couldn’t protest in her spelled sleep. He reached back up, cupped her neck in his hand and stared at her.

So serene. So warm. He traced her lips with his finger. He wanted to kiss her badly but held back, knowing that if he did he might lose his patience and go farther than he meant to.

Tonight, he would only sleep. His hands held onto her tight, as if she might wake and spring out of the bed at any moment.

Her breasts pressed softly against his chest, her skin was smooth and dotted with birthmarks. Unable to resist, Draco kissed her shoulder, her neck. He counted four on her arm, and two on her neck. He fell asleep wondering how many more she had under her pajamas.

Hermione stirred as the first rays of the sun hit her through the part in her curtains, which was strange because she did not remember leaving them that way before she’d gone to bed. Brushing it off as a kind act from the House Elves, she began to stretch but stopped almost immediately.

Something felt odd. Her lips, for that matter. They felt puffy and tender, and her own skin felt strange to her. She rubbed at her arms and shivered but didn’t know why. Hermione looked around her room, a crease between her brows. Nothing amiss but the curtains.

Still on edge, she clambered out of her bed and looked around her room for any sign of intrusion. None. She should have felt reassured by this but wasn’t. There was a faint scent lingering around her, a faint, unrecognizable musk. Sniffing delicately, she couldn’t tell if she was imagining it or not; it was so faint and seemed to be fading now that she was aware of it. Rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms away, she cast another glance around her room and headed for the shower.

Draco was already at breakfast in the Great Hall, slicing up a green apple as Blaise nodded off into his porridge. Pansy was gossiping with Daphne and Astoria, throwing dirty looks at

some Hufflepuffs across the room. He cut off a medium slice from his apple, the juice sliding down his fingers, and raised it to his lips just as the Head Girl walked in.

Memories of the previous night flooded his mind; her soft, warm skin, her arms around his neck, her head buried in his chest. Breasts softly pushing against his hard chest with every deep breath she'd taken.

He'd awoken with a painful erection, his hands tight around her waist. Staring into her sleeping face, he'd fantasized what her reaction would be should she wake up at that precise moment. His cock had hardened instantly, to the point of pain, poking between her joined thighs, but he kept himself still. No doubt the silly wretch would scream and hex him into oblivion. He was lucky she was still under his sleeping spell. He hadn't been able to stand it any longer, and had pressed his lips against hers, taking from them like he had done the first time, his hands wandering ever further, stealing a touch of what was forbidden.

She had let out a little moan and he had felt her nipples harden through her flimsy bra and he'd wanted more than anything to claim her right then and there—but didn't. It would not be as satisfying. He wanted her to be awake whether she was willing or not and now was simply not the opportune moment. He needed to shower and dress for the oncoming school day, and Granger couldn't sleep forever, either. As much as he would have liked to leave her there as his own little treat for later, he got up quickly and parted her curtains just slightly, so once the sun strengthened it would fall across her sleeping form. He'd padded back to her, grabbed her by the throat and placed a hard, possessive kiss on her lips and left, ending her sleeping spell as he closed her door. He'd taken care of his problem in the shower, grasping his cock with a shaking hand, moving it up and down almost furiously. He'd come hard, panting in the steam of the hot water, the image of the sleeping witch in his mind.

Now, his grey eyes landed on Granger and his lips curved, relishing in the fact that she'd no idea that she had slept with him the night before. Had she noticed anything amiss?

She sat down next to the Weaselette, giving her a sunny smile as she reached for the toast. Her hair was loose, curls cascading down, framing her beautiful face. Draco slipped another piece of fruit into his mouth as she chatted with her friend between bites of toast, throwing her hair over her shoulder, catching the attention of several boys nearby. One of them was McLaggen, who stared at her without expression, a goblet in his hand. Draco might have been a fair distance away but he recognized want when he saw it—it had looked him in the face every time he looked into a mirror lately.

Draco's grip tightened on his knife, his flesh turning white from the pressure. Oblivious to her admirers, Granger went about eating her breakfast. Stupid girl didn't even know how beautiful she was.

Potter and Weasley entered then, and greeted Granger and the female Weasley. They sat down in front of them, their backs to Draco, obstructing his target from view. He could only see a portion of Granger's face over Potter's shoulder, but Draco caught the warm smile she gave him.

Envy bubbled up inside him, rising to his chest and making him grip his knife even harder, digging the blade into his flesh.

He felt the pressure and pain of the silverware biting into his palm, and was dimly aware of warm blood running down his arm, mixing with the apple juice. Releasing the knife with a clatter, he wrapped his handkerchief around his palm. It stung, but he was hungry so it could wait. The pain helped distract him.

"Are you going to heal that?" Blaise asked from beside him.

"No." Draco resumed eating his breakfast. All the while his pulse joined and throbbed along with the pain in his hand.

"Any developments?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I'm here when you need anything."

Draco nodded and shoved away from the table, stuffing another apple into his pocket just as Granger was leaving the Great Hall, clutching a set of books to her chest.

"Morning," she said.

"Sleep well?" he asked. He shoved his hands in his pockets as they ascended the stairs.

Frowning, she looked up at him, a small crease between her dark brows.

"What do you care?"

Shrugging, he rolled his eyes towards the ceiling and raised his brows. "Just an innocent question, no need to hex me for it."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. "I slept just fine," she said, giving him a suspicious look. "What, did you set off fireworks in the dorm last night? Why do you want to know?"

"I'm not that stupid, Granger. I was just wondering whether we'd had another visit from our favorite poltergeist last night. I thought I heard him before I went to sleep."

There. If she really was on edge and suspecting him, that should shift the blame.

She blinked. "You did?" Suddenly she relaxed a little.

"I figured I could wait until morning to see what disaster he cooked up this time," Draco lied cleanly. "All I found was a dead mouse in my room."

That last sentence, at least, was true.

She grimaced.

"I tried to tell you about the mouse last night. I saw it running around before I went to bed and was going to warn you but you weren't there."

No, he hadn't been. Draco had spent all night working on the cabinet again.

"No need to worry about it now, then."

"Where were you?" She asked, a little too suspiciously.

He thought fast. "I spent the night in the company of a charming witch. I was sorry to leave her this morning."

“Oh. Well good for you.” She shook her head, but paused a second later.

“You haven’t been bringing anyone to the dorm, have you?”

“Don’t get your feathers aflutter,” he said calmly. “My witch and I spend our time in the Slytherin dormitory.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “For your sake, I hope you’re telling the truth.”

“Believe me, Granger,” he said seriously. “I wouldn’t dream of bringing another witch to our dorm.”

Not when a little bird calls so sweetly.

His smile was positively wolfish. Was he trying to embarrass her?

She looked away from him to face forward. “As long as you keep to the rules and I don’t hear about it, I don’t care what you do.”

Done and done, he thought.

“Does the topic make you uncomfortable?” He raised his brow suggestively.

“Hardly,” she stared back, undaunted. “I only think it’s very inappropriate to speak of your intimate relations with another person you hardly know.”

“But surely we’re not strangers to each other, Granger.” He took his injured hand out of his pocket to take a bite out of his precious apple.

“Well we aren’t strangers, but we’re definitely not friends either, and I just don’t want to hear about it.” Her eyes took in his bloodied hand and she made a face.

“What have you done to yourself?”

He looked at his wound impassively, then back up at her with the smallest bit of resentment in his eyes.

“Bit of an accident with a knife. I’ll mend it soon as I get to the common room.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off his hand. “You’re still bleeding... I could heal it, if you like.”

She reached out, holding her wand with an ‘Episkey’ on her lips when he practically jumped away from her touch.

“Remember my golden rule, Granger. Don’t touch me.” He walked off.

“I just wanted to stop the bleeding, Malfoy. You’re dripping all over the floor.”

“Is that what a non-stranger, non-friend would do?”

“You could get a serious infection if you don’t dress that quickly, you know. That’s a deep cut!”

“I’ll heal it myself. I don’t need your dirty paws on me.”

She caught up to him.

“Your little rule hasn’t stopped you from touching *me*, though. If you don’t want me to touch you, why do you go about slamming me into things and—and *kissing* me? Care to explain?”

She was blushing, but her embarrassment did not hinder her inquisition.

“Or is it a one way rule? You get to harass me as much as you like but I can’t so much as tap you on the shoulder? You’re a filthy hypocrite, Malfoy.”

“Need I remind you, Granger, that the kiss was merely to shut you up. I’d also like to remind you that you took it upon yourself to get even with me over that and so I consider the slate cleared. Bringing it up again and again will only start another fight, so you should really consider keeping your trap shut every now and then or that little mouth of yours will get you into trouble one day.” He leered at her as he spoke. “Yes, I admit I lost my temper on more than one occasion, but don’t forget that you provoked me in the first place, so stop playing the bloody victim.”

“You’re not answering my question!”

“Leave it be, Granger. I owe you no explanations.”

“Like hell, you don’t!”

They had reached the Head Common Room by then, and they climbed in with a stony silence between them. Hermione stalked off and sat before the fire, resuming her knitting, needles clacking angrily among the crackling of the fire. Draco held back a snort and entered his bathroom to dress his wound.

Draco pushed up his sleeve and stuck his left arm under the tap, let the water fall onto the cut, stinging his flesh as the water ran red down the drain. He grit his teeth and kept silent, eyes focused as the water cleared and he twisted the knob, the steam from the water rising in clouds around him. His palm ached, the slash in his flesh stung sharply. He pressed a finger into it, adding pressure to increase the pain, the flashes of white in his vision.

Don’t lose control.

It was so easy to, these days. He had never struggled this much before.

When his pulse had calmed and he turned the tap off, trained his wand on the wound, muttering a first a cleaning charm and then a healing spell, and watched with unfocused eyes as the flesh came back together, leaving a faint pink line on his palm, as if he’d merely scratched at it with a quill.

He stood there a moment, leaning on the sink, staring at himself in the cloudy mirror. Grey eyes looked into grey eyes, his mouth set in a straight line. Strands of his blond hair were falling into his face. There was a smudge of blood on his cheek. He wiped it off. He only thought of his mission and of the girl in the next room who wanted answers he could barely string together in his own head.

As he re-entered the living room, he stopped at the doorway, watching her. Knitting abandoned on the floor, she was immersed in a worn text, eyes staring at the pages but not reading.

She was frowning, her sweet mouth puckered into a little pout that made him lick his own lips as he recalled her taste. A hard thud brought him back to the girl, who had slammed her book shut and let it fall to the ground. She stood, checking the time, and jumped when she caught sight of him already there.

“What, did you forget I was here?”

She crossed her arms. “I forgot I have class soon, actually.”

He pretended to look surprised. “A first for you, I’ll bet.”

“Excuse me, I don’t want to be late.” Hermione shouldered her bag quickly and walked to the portrait, but he caught up just in time and stood in front of the door, blocking her exit.

“I haven’t excused you yet, Granger.” He said quietly, inspecting his healed hand as he spoke, leaning his tall frame against the door. Hermione’s eyes narrowed.

“What do you want? You’re going to make me late.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive that cataclysmic event. You’re Head Girl. You can make up any excuse and they’ll believe you. Why don’t you tell them we were mouse hunting? They’ll love that one.”

Hermione scowled. “Is that what you’re keeping me here for? Bad jokes?”

Something in his eyes had shifted. She didn’t know when but it sent a trickle of dread down her spine. It was time to leave.

“The only bad joke I’ve heard recently is that McLaggen wanted to go out with you.”

She gave him an odd look. She had never told him about that.

“How did you know that?”

“I guessed and you just confirmed it.” At her look of doubt, Draco scoffed. “It’s not that hard to infer from the way he went from all smiles to looking at you like you kicked his owl. Took it hard, did he?”

“This is none of your business.”

His lips hinted at a smile.

“Isn’t it?”

She fought the urge to shiver and pulled her wand from her pocket.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to get at but I don’t have the time for it. Let me through.”

Malfoy leaned against the door.

“Tell me one thing, Granger, before you go: if it had been Potter who’d asked you, and not McLaggen, would you have said yes?”

“Why do you want to know?” She asked, gripping her wand. “What does it matter to you?”

“I’ve been curious. You don’t seem to realize the effect you have on others.”

The effect you have on me.

She blinked, slowly turning pink.

"I don't pay attention to that sort of thing. I don't have—"

"—time for it," he finished, cutting her off, his pale eyes glinting. "Yes, you'd much rather hide in the library and make love to your books."

"You still haven't answered my question on *why* this should matter to you at all," she said.

"It shouldn't," he agreed. "But it does. You've got me in a bind, Granger, and I can't seem to get out of it."

She stared at him, trying to make sense of his words.

"Then you'd better find yourself a solution, because I don't think I want to hear any more of this, and I need to go. Step away from the door."

He did, his eyes never breaking from her. He was smirking, challenging her to approach.

She made it to the door quickly. He was a safe distance away—enough to hurry outside and get to safety. She grabbed the doorknob, managed to open the door an inch or two, and gasped as it slammed back shut with a shove from his hand.

"I've decided I need your help with this," he said from behind her.

Hermione turned quickly, her wand pointed at him, a curse on her lips. He diverted it with his wand easily. She sent another and he answered in kind—her body went slack, to her horror. Her hands went limp and her wand dropped to the floor. Her head fell back even as she fought against the curse, trying with all her might to stand straight. Whatever the curse was, she felt as if she'd been drugged. She blinked repeatedly and stumbled, trying to speak. Her tongue felt so heavy. Her legs felt like they were made of concrete—she couldn't move them. She would have crumpled to the ground if he had not rushed forward and held her up against the wall with his own body. One of his hands cradled the back of her head, supporting it.

"What have you done to me?" She managed to say. It was a struggle even to raise her eyes to look at him.

"Perhaps I overdid it," he muttered. He tapped her shoulder with his wand and suddenly she could move again, though she still felt weighed down by some invisible force, as if she were moving underwater.

Her energy somewhat restored, Hermione took her chance and began to fight him. Her fists pushed at his chest. She tried to punch his stomach but her arm moved too slowly. She tried to break away from between him and the wall. He pushed her back roughly—she winced and grit her teeth.

"Whatever you're doing, stop."

He reached up, traced her lips with his finger.

She stilled at once. Confusion and alarm made her tense. Their eyes met. Hermione began to shake.

“No.”

His other hand was around her neck, pushing her body firmly against the door. Hermione went cold as she understood his meaning. The cold vacancy in his gaze was as fascinating as it was frightening. He wouldn't break his stare. Her heart beat picked up until she feared it might implode in her chest. Were it not for the curse she would have kneed him and got away, but the force she could put behind it had been slashed by more than half by his curse and he would have seen it coming and dodged or hit her with another one. She squirmed, her hands trying to keep him at arm's length but he had closed in already. His eyes were on her lips and her face was red and her stomach sank. She couldn't look at him. She turned her head.

“Malfoy, I don't want this.”

The feel of his hand around her throat felt like it was searing itself onto her skin.

He came closer, eyes burning into hers.

“Neither did I.”

When he kissed her, her arms rose automatically to push against his chest but he gave a warning squeeze of her throat and whimpering, she froze, squeezing her eyes shut in fear. Malfoy groaned, ground himself against her. There was no mistaking his erection. Hermione gasped and tried pulling away, her face overtaken with a mortified blush. His hands kept her in place. His mouth held hers hostage.

This time he was gentler than the first kiss, but the added threat of his hand around her throat and the curse he'd placed on her made it no less traumatic. Using his fingers at the back of her neck, he caught some of her hair between them and used that to angle her head the way he wanted so he could kiss her better. She shook against him, hands at his shoulders, twitching in an effort to stay still. He licked her lower lip, bit it hard enough to make her gasp loudly. His other hand roamed down her back to squeeze her bottom—she gave a shocked squeal, edging away from his hand. He yanked her closer, squeezing harder on her neck. Eyes wide, she struggled to breathe. He trailed his lips along her clavicle and she shuddered with disgust, her hands automatically shoving at his chest, and he stopped, his eyes cold, a warning in them.

“Don't,” he whispered ominously and straightened, intent on kissing her again. She turned her head, tried summoning her wand in her mind. She couldn't look down at it to make sure it was moving since Malfoy had his hand around her throat still, and his lips had made their way to where her jaw met her neck, nibbling and sucking at her skin there. She felt a twinge of pain and winced.

“Stop, *please*,” she hissed.

“It will be over soon,” he whispered into her ear. “Let me have my fill.”

She shoved at him again but he held fast to her, his grip turning tighter on her throat until she started to wheeze. His free hand had crawled up her torso to grab her breast, hard.

*Accio wand. Accio wand. **Accio wand!***

Wood met her palm and she immediately hissed a “*Repulso*” that pushed him away from her with such force he almost fell on his back. If it weren't for the table nearby he would have

ended up on the other side of the room but he just tipped over it, almost lying flat on his back. He grunted and found his footing, panting, glaring at her. He reached up and wiped his mouth, coming closer, looking as if he meant to charge her.

"You can't keep me away," he said raggedly. "You can try, but you can't. And neither can I."

Her lips were trembling, still tender from his assault.

"We'll see about that," she said.

He took another step closer. She pointed her wand at him. He stopped.

With all her might she reached out and slapped him across the face.

Shaking, Hermione backed away from him, creating room between them by standing on the other side of the table. It was a struggle to breathe evenly. Her eyes were tearing up. He only stared, his cheek was pink with the slight mark of her hand and he advanced slowly towards her but stopped when she pointed her wand at him again, a curse ready on her lips.

They stayed that way for what seemed like ages, but neither one moved. He stayed impassive, stony as ever, his eyes never leaving her face. Her eyes swam with tears; a scarlet blush stained her cheeks.

The words came out of her mouth faster than he could hear them, and the next thing he knew there was a blazing pain in his cheek—first the left, then the right. He was forced backwards from the force of it. Hot blood trickled down his face and almost dazedly, he touched the smarting cuts with his fingertips.

"Don't you *ever* touch me again."

She was shaking so much she could hardly find the courage to snatch up her bag and walk a wide arc around him to reach the door, but somehow she did. He didn't turn to face her as she left, only stood there, eyes boring into the wall before him.

She walked slowly once she stepped out of the common room, but once she turned the corner she ran. Dropped her bag and ran, not even aware of where she was headed until she pushed open the door and found herself in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Quickly she thanked the Gods that Myrtle hadn't decided to flood the loo again; she let out a small sob and locked herself into the nearest stall. She was dimly aware of the bell ringing for class to begin, but didn't leave. Didn't want to go to class. She had not missed a single class this term so far and didn't want to start now, but how could she walk in there and act normally after what had just happened?

Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around herself, willing the tears not to fall, but they ignored her. Tightened her arms as her mind raced, replaying what had gone down with Malfoy in the common room. Her lips stung, and the tears kept falling. Her head hurt; she leaned against the stall and sat on the covered toilet seat, drawing her knees up to her chest, praying Myrtle wouldn't make an appearance so she could cry in peace.

The halls were full, streaming with hundreds of students on their way to their next class. Pushing a rebellious curl behind his ear, he walked quickly to his next lesson. It hadn't been a good day for him. His potion had exploded when he'd added the right ingredient in the wrong amount, his exams had come back with low marks, etc. And now he was on his way to the class he shared with Hermione where she would continue to act oblivious and innocent, and he would sit there both wanting her and hating her. He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't pay attention to where he was going and tripped over something. Regaining his balance with a mouthed swear, he stepped closer to the black object.

Certainly wasn't anything living. Looked like a pile of fabric. Or a schoolbag. He crouched down and lifted it up, surprised at the hefty weight it boasted. It seemed slightly familiar, but he couldn't quite find out why until he looked inside for the name label and saw the familiar script of one Hermione Granger.

Suddenly, his day seemed to have gotten a million times better. Cormac shrank the bag with his wand and tucked it into his pocket, walking away with a new spring in his step.

Draco sat at his last class of the day, face still stinging from the cuts she'd given it, only just healed by Madame Pomfrey, who had just assumed he had gotten himself into a fight. No marks had been left on him but he wondered if Granger had looked into a mirror yet, wherever she was, and noticed the hickey he had left on her neck, just below her jaw.

The class was shared with the Gryffindors. Granger wasn't there. Of course, all her other little Housemates were worried, glancing at her empty seat every now and then, as if they couldn't believe that she would skip a class. Potter and Weasley kept sending him suspicious glances, but Draco ignored them and went about his work without the slightest weight on his conscience.

He wondered where she had gone off to. Would she tell? He fervently hoped not. He planned to kiss her again, and if he was expelled, it was likely he would never have another chance. He had to find a way to silence her.

The way her lips felt, the little scream she'd let out when he'd groped her, twisting and turning to get away from him, her delicious fear... His arousal was threatening to overwhelm him, but he calmed it down with some effort, and luckily, no one noticed. His eyes strayed back to the Head Girl's empty seat, wondering where she was and if he would see her again that night.

Hermione awoke some time later, eyes dry and heavy from her impromptu nap. Her limbs were sore and stiff from having stayed in the same position for so long. Hermione groggily stood up and stretched, washing her hands and tired face at the sink. She had no idea what the time was but it felt late, and she knew she'd missed not only one but half her classes for the day. She hated to think about what she might have missed in class—she would find Harry and Ron and try to get them to fill her in, and then she would try to tell them what had happened, because one forced kiss from Malfoy was bad, but two was worse and his behavior through it all had her suspecting there was a deep underlying problem that had to be addressed before things got worse.

Running back, hair flying everywhere, she didn't see him there, so it came as a shock when she collided into something large and heavy. She gave a small shriek of surprise and stepped back immediately, heart racing.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, looking up at Cormac McLaggen, who was smiling down at her, a glint in his eye.

"There you are. Don't sweat it, Granger. Were you looking for this?" With a flourish, he brought out and magically restored to original size her bag.

"Thank you," she said, smiling as best as she could. Her eyes were red and had she known she would have worried he might ask why, but he never did.

"It's nearly dinnertime. Fancy walking down with me?" He smiled at her, holding out his arm. Hermione hesitated for a second or two, but finally took his arm, letting him lead her down to the Great Hall.

When he'd offered his arm, Hermione had fretted for a moment. It wasn't like he was asking her out again, was it? She didn't really want to walk down with him, but he had found and given her her bag, so she couldn't begrudge him this could she? Besides, she didn't want to face the risk of coming across Malfoy in the corridor alone. She debated on this as they walked down the silent corridor. She felt composed enough compared to earlier, but was immensely relieved to find that Malfoy was not at dinner, not knowing that after class he had gone to look for her at her window in the library and then to the dormitory, and was currently sitting there in complete silence, waiting for her to return.

9. M

I don't own Harry Potter.

They sat in front of the grand fire in the Gryffindor Common Room, sipping hot chocolate from large mugs as they completed their Potions essay. Hermione lay on her stomach, propped up by her elbows on soft cushions. Ron was sitting upside down on the chintzy armchair beside her, muttering random things and waving his wand in the air, amusedly watching as little bubbles or colored wisps of smoke burst from the tip of his wand. Harry sat cross-legged against the sofa, scribbling the last lines of his essay, but he kept stealing glances at the curly-haired witch in front of him.

Her nose was wrinkled in concentration, she mouthed out the words she wrote on her parchment, her eyes scanning each line for errors that needed fixing. A curly lock of hair fell in her eyes and she pushed it away distractedly, only for it to return immediately. Conjuring a ribbon, she sat up and began to tie her hair back with a small scowl, her eyes still glued to her parchment. Harry smiled—he knew too well how she hated whenever something broke her concentration.

Catching Harry looking at her from her peripheral vision she turned to face him, arms in her hair. “Need help, Harry?” she asked as she finished tying the bow with a tight yank.

Harry went red as she fixed her eyes on him, embarrassed at having been caught. Of course, she didn't notice his flush, only came over in her busy manner and read his essay over his shoulder. The skin on his neck tingled as her warm breath brushed past it. Her curls tickled the side of his face and his shoulder; he became hyper-aware of her next to him. Belatedly, he realized she had said something and was staring at him expectantly.

Shit. He hadn't paid attention to a word she'd spoken. She was waiting for a reply.

“Er, what?” was his guilty answer.

Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly and said, “Your paper is really good, Harry, only you're missing the importance the newt's blood plays in the potion.” She handed it back with a smile and shuffled around her papers into a neater pile. “Ron?” she twisted around to talk to the ginger, who was falling asleep on the chair.

“Hm?” He raised his arm from over his eyes and cracked one eye open at the witch who was glaring at him, hands on her hips.

“Have you finished your paper?” he nodded lazily and pointed it out from the messy pile on the carpet, closing his eyes again as she retrieved it with a wave of her wand. She skimmed it and nodded curtly. “Well done, Ro— Oh for heaven's sake—!” she flicked at his arm with her fingers, eliciting a muffled groan from her friend, who had promptly fallen back asleep.

“At least he did his work,” Harry offered, grinning. Hermione sighed and smiled back as she flicked her wrist, sending all her papers into her schoolbag.

Walking over, she sat down next to Harry, who tried not to smile. Harry fished out a few cauldron cakes from his bag and gave one to Hermione, who thanked him and began to unwrap it.

They ate in silence, Ron’s snores and the crackling of the fire filling their ears. The moonlight streamed in from the glass windows, lighting up the far side of the common room, where a group of first-years sat in silence, poring over vast texts.

She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. Harry swallowed the last of his pastry and turned to face her.

“Malfoy hasn’t been bothering you too much lately, has he?”

Hermione hesitated. She didn’t know whether she should tell him or not. She had meant to say something the night before but then Cormac had found her, and it had been impossible during and after dinner since Ginny had been with them the whole time and they had spent hours talking about whatever. It had felt so nice to be with her friends and not think about Malfoy or what had happened for a while, that she had said nothing. Besides, she wasn’t sure she was comfortable talking about it to them still, despite their closeness. That he had escalated from not only kissing but also groping her was troubling and embarrassing. He had cursed her so that she could barely defend herself but she still felt that shame from the first assault, that she had let herself down though it had not been by choice.

Plus—she glanced around the common room—this was not the place, even if she could summon her courage to tell them. The room was crowded and quiet. Anyone could hear.

“He’s been tolerable. Still a horrid git, but he’s responsible enough and I can take the insults.”

“What insults?”

Hermione cracked a small smile. “The usual, but they don’t bother me anymore.”

Now something else does.

“Has it gotten easier, living with him?”

“As long as we stick to each other’s rules and don’t argue too much.”

But he still crosses the line, even if everything’s going well.

Harry stretched. “I imagined he’d separated the place into two sides with tape.”

“That would have made things much easier, really. I wouldn’t have minded.”

“As long as you could still see him from your side, anyway, so you could hex him if he gets to be too much of a bother.”

She laughed. “Exactly.”

Harry bumped his shoulder into hers. “We’ve missed having you around.”

“I’ve missed you too,” she admitted. “Believe it or not, Malfoy’s terrible company.”

Harry snorted. Ron gave a deafening snore and they both jumped, stifling their laughter. When they settled down, Hermione had tears in her eyes, and they weren't all related to Ron's snoring. She wiped them away quickly, her laugh winding down.

"When's the ball?"

She looked up at him quizzically, rolling her eyes upward as she recalled the information. "Next Saturday. Why, Harry?"

He scratched his arm.

"I dunno, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me."

Hermione started. "But what about Ron?" she whispered back, flicking her eyes to where her sleeping friend lay.

"He asked Lavender yesterday. Is that a no, then?" Harry's flush grew more prominent.

"Yes, I mean—no! I mean, no, that is not a no, and I will go to the Ball with you Harry. I'd really like that." She found herself giggling quietly. Strange. She never laughed like this.

"Don't expect me to dance," he warned, grinning.

"Oh, Harry, there's nothing to be afraid of with dancing. It's really quite simple!"

"What is?"

Ron had finally woken. He stretched his seat, wincing.

"Dancing."

He gave them a dubious look. "No, it's not. It's embarrassing."

Hermione scowled at him.

"But I'll do it if I have to." He looked perplexed. "What did I miss? Have you signed me up for something?"

"Hermione and I are going to the ball together," Harry said.

"Oh, cheers." Ron gathered his things together and dropped them off the side of the armchair, then settled comfortably into it. "Should be fun."

"It's getting late," Hermione said. "I should be getting back, Malfoy and I are supposed to patrol the dungeons tonight." Ice dripped down her spine when she said it—she'd forgotten until now.

She had tried taking a page from Malfoy's book and had written to Georgie to see if she was available but Georgie had not replied. Hermione figured she had let her know too late.

Harry stood up, offering her his hand. "Come on, I'll walk you there."

Draco paced angrily around the common room. It was ten past ten and Granger was nowhere to be found. What could be holding her up? He wanted to smash something. A shiny

object caught his eye, and he advanced towards the glittering vase when he heard footsteps outside. With quick, hard steps he reached the door and flung it open expectantly.

There she was with Potter, standing to the side of the door. Draco's eyes narrowed when he saw that Potter had Granger's hand in his. Granger was blushing, but her chin was raised and her eyes were cold and angry. It was the first time they'd properly seen each other since the second assault, both of them knew the other had not forgotten about it. He had waited for her in the common room after dinner, but either she had slept in the Gryffindor dorms that night or she had come back very late, because he'd had to relent and go work on the cabinet and had come back in the early hours of the morning, too tired to want to do anything else.

Had she told at last? Potter's stare was unfriendly and inscrutable, but not hostile like Draco had expected. He supposed Potter would have cursed him first before saying anything if he knew what Draco had done.

But Potter didn't matter. Draco barely even looked at him. His eyes were on Granger, flickering from her eyes to her lips. She almost took a step back but stayed put. He liked that.

Brave girl.

"You're late."

His fists were clenched. He avoided looking at their joined hands.

Malfoy's glare rooted her to where she stood. Hermione could barely tear her gaze away. His eyes were on her lips and she felt her skin crawl, knowing where his thoughts lied. Suddenly she felt very foolish for not having done anything to prevent going on patrol with him. She would have to be on her highest guard, and then race to switch patrol partners in the morning.

"I'm aware of that, Malfoy." She turned to Potter, and he watched as her features softened. She hugged him, lingering a fraction longer than she should have. Draco grit his teeth.

"Goodnight," he heard her say to Potter.

"Goodnight," He whispered back.

Harry wanted to kiss her but didn't dare in front of Malfoy. He looked angry and repulsed enough, and Harry was in no mood for a quarrel today. He smiled at Hermione and cast one suspicious look at Malfoy over his shoulder before turning and heading down the corridor.

Hermione didn't waste any time. Turning on her heel, she walked off towards the dungeons.

Draco followed, suspicious and angry. What had that been, with Potter? Had they finally gotten together? After what had happened the day before? Anger shot through him. Had she run into Potter's arms after he had kissed her? After he had marked her? He wondered again whether she had told someone. They might be plotting against him now. Was she biding her time, or had she secretly told the Headmaster and was waiting for him to take action?

Draco narrowed his eyes. He would try again, then. She had not learned her lesson. He would make sure it would stick this time.

He followed her at a distance, his eyes on her silhouette. He thought of the second kiss. Though he did not regret it he lamented that he hadn't been able to control himself better.

This is what she's done to you, he told himself. She's ruined you.

But that kiss... he still wanted more.

They had reached the dungeons, each lost in their own thoughts. Careful not to walk close to Malfoy, Hermione was thinking about the ball, and about Harry. She honestly hadn't expected anyone to ask her, not even Harry. She'd not thought to ask if they would go as friends or something more, though she figured he would not have bothered to ask as friends, for they usually ended up together in most of the events they went to.

Draco was thinking about his mission. He'd made considerable progress on the wardrobe lately. If he kept up at this rate, he'd have it done sometime in the spring. His thoughts shifted to the upcoming ball. He'd asked Daphne Greengrass to go with him. Naturally, she'd said yes. He honestly didn't care about her, but he needed a date as well as a good fuck, so he'd gone and killed two birds with one stone. He wondered if Granger had a date yet. Had Potter finally grown the nerve to ask her?

Granger kept a distance between them, walking quickly ahead, checking every crevice and every door. Draco watched her, stewing in his thoughts. Did she want this over quickly so she could go hide from him again? Or run back to Potter? No, he would deny her that chance.

Hermione's skin prickled, and the lightest shudder ran through her body. He was watching her. Picking up her pace, she set her jaw and advanced further into the dungeons, eager to escape from his cold eyes. Here the dungeons got darker and darker as she progressed through them. Even the torches on the wall had guttered out, to her surprise. Hermione cast a Lumos Maxima. The light her wand produced barely allowed her to see her own hand.

Peeves. He must have held on to more of that Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder.

Despite that, it seemed as though the darkness here was too heavy. It didn't help that the dungeons were cold, either—she could hear Malfoy's slow footsteps behind her could barely make out his form in the darkness. He had lit his wand as well but its light was as dim as hers. She drew her robe more tightly around herself and walked on, wondering if she should just turn back. Dread crept slowly up her spine, and again she felt with too-late certainty that she should not have come.

She turned, having made up her mind.

"It's too dark," she said towards where she had seen Malfoy last. "We should just go and report this to Filch tomorrow."

There was no reply. Malfoy's footsteps had stopped. She squinted, trying to find him, uneasy.

"Malfoy?"

Nothing. She thought she heard a rustle behind her and turned quickly, her wand aloft.

"This isn't funny."

"Does this feel like a joke to you, Granger?"

His voice came at last from directly behind her and she jumped just as his arms wound around her. One restrained her arms behind her back. The other barred across her waist and pulled her to him. Hermione stumbled, too caught in surprise to react. How had he done that? And where was her wand? It was not in her hand anymore.

“Get off me,” she snarled, struggling to break her arms free from his grasp. His hands slid down to her wrists, squeezing painfully. She gasped with the pain, but with all her strength she twisted far away from him as his hold allowed and tried to kick him. He averted that and pushed her against the wall, leaning against her heavily.

“This is *not* going to happen again,” she said angrily. “Get away from me.”

“It’s already happening,” he said tonelessly. “You can’t stop it.”

She pushed off the wall and turned to flee but he caught her and held her against the wall again, her front pressed against the cold stone, her arms in his grip.

She struggled. He held on tighter, let go of one arm and grabbed onto the other with both hands to turn her back around just as she viciously moved in the opposite direction, trying to break out of his hold.

He felt it under his fingers—she’d dislocated her shoulder.

Hermione gasped and tried not to scream, took in a deep breath. Her shoulder throbbed with pain.

“Let me go,” she whispered. “I’m hurt, Malfoy. Let me go **now**.” Her voice was faint but full of anger.

“Why would I do that, Granger?” he whispered in her ear. She flinched as his lips brushed against the area just under her ear, placing small kisses on her flushed skin. “So you can go run off and tell your precious Potter?”

“I need to go to the Hospital Wing, Malfoy!”

She spoke haltingly as she tried to push him away from her with her good arm, and the movements were jostling her other arm, which continued to hurt.

“You don’t need the Hospital Wing,” he said calmly.

“You don’t get to make decisions for me,” she snapped, clutching at her arm. She tried to pull away again, hissing in pain.

“Don’t fight me, Granger,” Malfoy said coolly. “You try my patience, sometimes.”

She snorted. “Yes, you’ve always had the patience of a saint, haven’t you.” She tried to leave.

Draco raised his wand and pointed it at her.

“Immobulus.”

Granger froze in place, pale with dread. He held her chin in his thumb and forefinger, willing away the spell from her face so she could still speak.

“Don’t you *dare* touch me,” she said, her lips curling back.

“Or what?” He taunted, his thumb reaching up to brush over her bottom lip. “You’ll tattle? You’ve had enough chances by now—but you’ve said nothing, haven’t you.”

Her face was red—in the darkness, the blush could barely be seen but Draco could feel it under his touch, the heat that flooded her face.

“I…”

“Why is that?” He asked softly.

She didn’t answer, seething.

“You like it, don’t you?” He murmured, stroking her cheek. “Is that why, Granger? Don’t be embarrassed if it’s the truth.”

“No!”

He felt a tear roll down his hand. He reached around her with his other arm, pressed his hand against her lower back. She shook her head.

“Let me go, Malfoy…” she hitched a little gasp to keep from sobbing. “I won’t tell anyone if you stop. Just stop.”

Draco stepped closer, kissed her. She recoiled as best as she could through his Immobilizing spell.

“I’m not going to stop, and I’m going to make sure you don’t tell.”

“No—”

Before she could reply, he cast a spell that made her go limp and caught her swiftly before she could hit the ground, hooking his arm under her legs and the other supporting her back. He lifted her up and to his chest, holding onto her securely.

Her breathing was ragged, frightened.

“What are you doing?” Mild hysteria tinged her voice. “Where’s my wand?”

“I’m taking you back to the dorm to heal you, little bird.”

“I don’t want *you* to heal me! Put me down, Malfoy!”

She felt good in his arms. Draco was sure if he had not paralyzed her with magic, she would have been fighting him like a cat trying to stay out of water. She smelled lovely, the scent of her shampoo was hitting him full in the face and he couldn’t get enough of the feel of her, helpless, in his arms.

“Someone’s got to heal you, silly,” he said, “and I won’t have you spreading lies to Pomfrey about how you injured yourself.”

“This is all *your* fault,” she hissed. “I’m going to tell everyone the truth. I should have before.”

“No, you won’t,” he said coldly.

Because you’re not going to remember this tomorrow.

She was staring at the high vaulted ceilings, blinking rapidly, trying to summon her wand so she could get free, but thanks to her panic she couldn't concentrate. She struggled this way internally the whole way to the dorm.

When they entered, Draco set her down onto the couch carefully to not exacerbate her injury.

Her brown eyes spat venom up at him. He ignored her and reached for her shoulder. She hissed when he brought his hands to it, trying to fight the spell.

Hermione watched with growing fear as he held her shoulder, probing her flesh softly with his fingers. His face betrayed no emotion other than concentration as he set about his task.

"This will hurt. Brace yourself," he warned in a low voice and braced his other hand against her shoulder.

Hermione screwed her eyes shut, distracted herself by trying to summon her wand again but Malfoy was too close, his hands on her stole all her attention so she felt everything, even immobilized, and winced at the odd, painful sensation as Malfoy popped her shoulder back into its socket.

He crouched in front of her on the floor, stared up at her as she gingerly tried moving her arm to make sure he had done it properly.

"Better?"

"This was all your fault. I told you to leave me alone."

He shrugged one shoulder. "That's gratitude for you. All the same, you owe me."

Hermione eyed him warily. "I owe you nothing. You did this, it was fitting you were the one to heal it. That ends it."

He smiled without humor and stood. He flicked his wand and she could move her body again—Hermione rushed to move off the couch but Malfoy pointed to her arm and pinned it in place against the back of the couch. Then the other.

"No— Where is my wand? Give it to me, you rat!"

Draco freed one arm and gripped it painfully to make sure she wouldn't pull it away. She tried anyway and failed.

"This will hurt more if you move too much," he said.

He took the tip of his wand and held it against her skin. Somehow, the tip of his wand felt like a small blade, she let out a horrified cry as she watched it cut through her flesh.

"What are you *doing*?" she breathed, pain lacing through her arm as she watched her own blood begin to leak out of the wound.

"Teaching you a lesson long overdue."

Gods, it hurt. The more she struggled the better he restrained her, and what on earth was he carving into her? His pale eyes were focused on her arm, on his makeshift knife. He was so intent. She caught him licking his lips.

“Have you gone mad?” She asked incredulously. He didn’t answer.

Malfoy kept his eyes trained on her pale skin, which was now dripping blood. Her dirty blood—which was as clean and as red and as normal looking as his own. Confusion radiated through him, but he wasn’t about to stop. In a matter of minutes, he finished, wiping the tip of his wand on his robes.

On the verge of unconsciousness, Hermione tried to pull away again. She felt dizzy and weak, her vision faded in and out. She could feel her blood running down her arm—the couch underneath her arm was already soaked with the blood. He’d cut her just in the crook of her elbow, and the blood was running down in thick streams. Vomit crept up her throat. If there was one thing she hated, it was blood. Fuzzy colored dots danced before her eyes. She tried feebly to move again, but it hurt too much.

“You’ll be expelled for this. I swear I’ll have you thrown in Azkaban, you awful—” her words were cut off as he somewhat violently pulled away, taking his wand with him.

Hermione, trying to breathe evenly, looked at what he had done.

Where before there had been intact, smooth skin, was now become a bloody, cut-up mess. He had scrawled an ornate ‘M’ into her arm, and as she angled it to see it better, mute with horror, fresh blood oozed from it.

She looked up and saw Malfoy still there, looking at the mark as if he too couldn’t believe what he had done.

“Why?” She asked thickly, uncomprehending.

His eyes met hers. She felt the weight of his cold gaze settle over her.

“You need to learn your place,” he said.

“Give me my wand and I’ll show you yours, in a cell,” she said, feeling dizzy than ever. “Why an M?”

The strangest impulse took hold of him and he bent down, took her arm, and licked the wound in one long stroke, her blood cloying and hot on his tongue.

“Because you’re a Mudblood. Because you’re *mine*.”

Whether she had heard that or not, he didn’t know. When he looked back up, she was unconscious.

Working carefully, he healed her carved arm, vanished the bloodstain from the couch, then picked her up and carried her into her room, laying her down onto her bed, cast a sleeping spell on her so she would not create any more trouble. His mind felt oddly empty, almost peaceful.

The red of her blood coated his hands. Draco stared at it for a moment. The taste still lingered in his mouth. He was hard and hadn’t realized it.

Curious, he picked up his wand and cut through his flesh at the joint in his arm, biting his tongue to keep from gasping. Blood began to flow rapidly and he held his arm out next to hers, where the blood was still flowing, but in smaller amounts now.

Their blood was the same.

He tried hers again, frowning, then his own. No horrible, disgusting taste. Not muddy at all. Tasted just like blood. The taste of copper filled his mouth, and he swallowed hastily. How was this possible?

He waved his wand and muttered a few spells and they were both clean, now his wound was healed and the blood was nowhere to be seen. He waved his wand once more and she was changed out of her robes and into random sleepwear from her trunk, tucked into her sheets.

One last thing. Her threats had not been forgotten. Draco was in no mood for expulsion or imprisonment. Now that he had marked her, he had pushed them both into a territory there was no coming back from. He would see this through.

Much as he wanted to spend the night with her, there was the vanishing cabinet that still needed work. There would be time with her later, after he succeeded.

Draco withdrew her wand from his pocket and placed it on her night table, took out his own and touched it to her forehead. She slept on, unaware.

“Oblivate.”

Hermione’s troubled expression eased into blankness, and Draco bent forward, placed a kiss on her arm, where the skin was like new under the concealment charm he placed on the freshly healed mark, and then one on her lips.

He left her room with a last, lingering glance, shutting off her lights and closing her door as quietly as he could.

The bruising winds threatened to overpower her as she trudged through the high snow. She had shrunk down her purchases from the shops she’d visited and stowed them safely in her bag. The winds whipped her stray curls around, stinging her cheeks and biting at her skin. Hermione crossed her arms and looked around to make sure she was heading in the right direction. Straightening, she adjusted her scarf went on her way to The Three Broomsticks, shivering all the while.

The bells chimed as she entered, merry music was being played and over it the busy drone of many conversations being held at once inside the small establishment. Fires blazed in their hearths, every table was occupied. Hermione took off her scarf, the snowflakes still lingering there melted quickly as she looked around for Harry and Ron. A few voices called out greetings as she passed and she waved in their direction, not able to find who exactly had called out to her in the crowd.

“Oi! Over here!” Someone shouted, and she turned to see Ron standing in one corner with his arm raised to flag her down.

Hermione grinned and made her way over, unbuttoning her coat. Harry handed her a Butterbeer as she sat down.

"We were about to go and look for you," Ron said as he sat down beside Harry.

"No need, I'm here," Hermione said, taking a drink. Almost immediately the spicy-sweet drink warmed her insides, giving her a delicious, bubbly feeling.

"Terrible out, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Very. I hope I don't catch a cold," Hermione responded, taking another drink, feeling it warm her down to her toes. "The snow's so thick outside I walked into two other students on my way here."

Ron chuckled.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and in just enough time. We ought to leave soon if we want to make it back to the castle for dinner, or we'll be snowed-in here for days."

Despite Hermione's concern, the storm died quickly so they spent a few more hours in the pub, chatting with each other and anyone who dropped by for a quick hello. Lavender joined them briefly before going away again, but she spoke mostly to Ron. Before they exited the pub, Hermione cast a strong warming charm on them all, and they began their ascent back up to the castle.

They entered the school, Evanescor'd their boots and trudged into the Great Hall, where dinner was about to begin.

"I'm going to put my things away," Hermione told Harry and Ron. "I'll be back."

She hurried up the stairs and made her way to the Head dorm in record time. Once she had extracted her shopping bags she restored them back to their original size, setting them onto her bed. She picked up the heaviest bag and took out the parcel inside it, wrapped in sturdy tissue paper.

She unwrapped the parcel and hummed happily when her dress unfolded, reaching the floor in its length. The soft fabric whispered as it brushed the floor. Hermione gingerly laid it out on her armchair; she'd have time to properly hang it up when she came back; her grumbling stomach bid her rush back down to the Great Hall.

Draco didn't bother with dinner, he had two green apples in his pocket and that was enough for him. Excitement filled his stomach. He'd reached a breakthrough with the wardrobe, it was almost working. He sat in the ancient, dirty room and crunched into his apple, looking around himself. So many lost things. How had they gotten there? How had this room come into existence? Did anyone ever come back to retrieve anything?

Without thinking he kicked a broken chair and watched it crash to the floor, bringing down a massive pile of boxes. Several burst open at the impact with the floor. Many held books, others musty old robes and hats, but there was one that caught his eye. Smaller than the rest, it

dimly glittered in the light of the chandelier he'd repaired weeks ago. It was a jewelry box—old, but beautiful. Dark green with pearls embedded into it, his fingers ran over the intricate designs lightly and found the clasp that held it closed. It was locked, so he muttered a quick *Alohamora* and it creaked open.

He lifted the lid and peered inside. An incredulous grin worked itself onto his face. Who had lost this? Who had it belonged to? He inspected the box on all sides and found no inscription, no initials to reveal more information. Well, no matter. He had found it. It was his now. He snapped the box shut and tucked it into his pocket.

I might have some use for this.

It was late when he returned to the dorm and changed into his sleepwear, tucked the box into his trunk. The common room was dark and empty as he walked across it to her door, eased it open silently. She was there. He cast his charms to keep her unaware and crawled into bed with her, his hands wandering greedily. He fell asleep behind her, his body curling around hers, one hand under her pillow they both shared, the other arm slung over her hip, his hand lying flat on her stomach.

10. The Ball

I don't own Harry Potter, just the plot.

They were sitting in the warm common room, studying in silence. Draco sat at the table, his papers and books spread out over the wooden surface. Brow furrowed, he was immersed in his Transfiguration textbook, his quill scratching on the parchment. Granger sat a short distance away, reclining on the sofa with her feet raised up so her knees almost met her chest, a heavy tome in her lap. He had skipped dinner to work on the cabinet some more and had returned early to find Granger there and decided to settle at the table to do his work and watch her discreetly. He felt her uneasiness, but it faded after an hour or so of the joint studying and there hadn't been a word between them.

Ever since the day of the second kiss she had kept a distance around him, refusing to sit with him at the table or even going so far as to switching around seats if he sat too close to her during class. He didn't mind that so much since he made sure to pay her his secret night time visits. He had been on his 'best' behavior recently so as not to spark her suspicion. Neither of them had said anything about the second kiss—he could tell sometimes she would think about it when he was near because she would tense up and cross her arms, her face troubled and red. What was she thinking? He dearly wanted to know. He was still shocked she had told nobody, but it worked to his benefit. Perhaps she was waiting for the right time to strike back, but her not bringing it up at all gave him the notion she had resolved to forget about it and be on her guard around him.

He thought of the way he had mutilated her arm.

Too late.

A strong sense of paranoia had gripped Draco after he had erased her memory of the night he had carved his initial into her arm. He feared he had not done it right, and that she would remember what he had done, and the other accusations would follow immediately after. He'd been keeping a closer eye on her since to make sure it didn't happen.

He hadn't liked erasing her memory. What was the point of having done all that if only he remembered it? But she would have raised hell if he had let her free. If she did, he would have been promptly expelled, just like she'd threatened. When the time was right, he would restore that memory. She bore his mark for a reason, and he would make sure she knew it. She might want to go traipsing around with Potter, but he had claimed her first.

The previous night, he had spent the entire night working on the cabinet and had been so tired afterward he had not bothered entering her room. All his assignments were barely paid any attention unless he had the time to spare to do them. Lately this meant he was falling behind in most of his classes, but he didn't care. If everything continued progressing at the rate it was already going, the cabinet would be ready soon, and where he was going, it didn't matter whether he had finished school or not.

Absently, he patted his pocket and feeling the green jewelry box inside, he stole a covert look at the oblivious witch who was searching through her schoolbag which lay on the floor while still sitting on the couch. Not a wise thing to do, really, because she wobbled and almost fell, but at the last moment she kicked out her leg, trying to maintain her balance.

As her leg flung out, her skirt inched up her leg and he caught a glimpse of her white thigh, just above where her black stocking ended. Immediately he pictured that thigh and its twin wrapped around his hips, the warmth they held. Draco muttered a swear or two and glued his eyes back onto his book, scouring the pages for the answers. The tip of his quill dug deeper into his parchment, threatening to tear through it.

“Malfoy.”

Her voice brought him back. He raised his eyes and coolly stared back at the frowning witch.

“Have you spoken to Flitwick yet? About the band.”

He held her gaze for a second before replying, “Yes. They’re ready.”

She nodded. “Good. Hagrid will be putting up the trees tomorrow in the Great Hall.”

Draco’s eyes flicked down to her thigh. She had not realized yet her skirt had ridden up. Not that he could see much, but the view was still tantalizing enough. He wondered what color her panties were and forced himself to look away, need pricking at him.

“Fine.”

He turned back to his paper, the exchange over. She, not minding at all, did the same. Now that the dance was almost upon them she was eager to get it over with. It had come together easily but she was tired of it taking up so much of her attention. Malfoy had been less communicative lately and she didn’t mind that either, but when so much had the potential to go wrong, she’d had to resort to peppering him with questions which she didn’t want to do, seeing as the second kiss was still fresh in her mind.

He had been spending less time in the dorm again and that helped. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, she didn’t care as long as it didn’t mean another headache for her. Instead, she thought of how she’d hung out with Harry and Ron earlier; they’d gone to visit Hagrid, and had had a wonderful time talking and drinking tea. Afterwards, they had gone walking around the castle right before dinner. It had really lifted her spirits, spending time with them.

All the schoolwork they had been given lately was almost too much to bear. Even Hermione had been struggling to keep up to the point where she was barely able to focus on anything else. It came to the point that she feared that in focusing so little on anything else, she was beginning to get too careless. More than once already she had found strange bruises on her body, and once had woken with a strange stiffness and soreness in her arm. Upon inspection nothing was wrong, but if she pressed a finger to it, hurt quite badly. She couldn’t remember hitting her arm against anything the day before, so she decided she must have been thrashing around in her sleep and knocked it against a bedpost. She had awoken abruptly a week ago, sweating under her bedding as though she’d had a nightmare. She hadn’t remembered going to sleep, or even changing into her pajamas. The last thing she

remembered from the night before was the dungeons and that dark, dark corridor that had been Peeves's work. If she thought hard she could recall a brief memory of entering the dorm, but the perspective had been off as if she'd been sideways, like she'd been falling down.

Did the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder have side-effects? She couldn't recall any from the first incident with them, but the concentration had been worse down in the dungeons. She would have to write to Fred and George and ask for details. Perhaps she had tripped and hit her head, hence the memory gap.

Either that or this is Malfoy's doing.

She didn't like to think about that. Call her weak, call her stupid, call her a coward. This was out of her field. She was not used to things like this, because they never happened to her. And now they were. Or they had. And she had never expected or studied for this and didn't know what to do. Obviously, she should tell someone. She knew that, and after the second time he had forcibly kissed her she had tried to gather the courage to tell someone, but Dumbledore and Harry were off on some secret mission again, Ron was spending time with Lavender, and when she found herself outside Professor McGonagall's office she felt such a feeling of shame come over her she couldn't even bring herself to knock on the door. Wherever the shame came from she couldn't determine since she knew she had no fault in what Malfoy had done to her, but it was enough to keep her silent, and she hated it. How could she talk about something like this to a Professor?

It would go away soon, she told herself. If he tried anything else, she would not hesitate to report him.

As she thought, she stared down at her completed Transfiguration paper and tapped her candy quill against her lips, too distracted to realize Malfoy was watching.

Draco watched her suck on her quill, her pretty little lips wrapping around the sweet and suddenly the front of his pants felt too tight. He watched as she licked some of the candy off her bottom lip and he almost groaned, his cock twitching for attention. He couldn't believe the effect this girl had on him.

That she was a Mudblood didn't matter anymore. He had seen her blood and it had shaken him to his core. Not only had he received that nasty shock at seeing how her blood was the same as his, but he'd also let himself go too far with engraving that M on her arm. Much too far. His anger had gotten the better of him again.

But she needed to learn her lesson. Even though she doesn't know about the mark, it's still there, and she deserved it. It proves she's mine.

In addition to the memory erasing he had put an undetectable concealment charm on her arm as well, sneaking into her room every night since to refresh it to make sure she couldn't see it the following day. Sometimes he spent the night in her bed too, limiting himself to kissing only, since anything beyond that would give her a glaring clue. It was a matter of constant restraint to not peel away her clothes and ravage her. He would be painfully erect every time he awoke before her, wanting nothing more than to satisfy his lust, and had to alleviate himself in the shower. Once, he had done it right there in her bed, her body right next to his, her ass pushed sweetly against his hardened length. He had gripped her hips, unable to control himself, and had ground against her until his release tore through him,

wrenching an almost tortured groan from his throat. She, in her spelled sleep, felt nothing. He had enormously enjoyed the sight of his cum on her pajamas but had vanished the mess before he left. He couldn't wait to do it again.

Movement caught his eye, and he looked up to see Granger picking up her things and head toward the door. She didn't look once in his direction, but said as she passed by, "If Harry and Ron come, tell them I'm in the library, please."

Irritation and jealousy provoked him to spit out after her, "I'm not a bloody owl, Granger. Tell them yourself!" as the door shut behind her.

Hermione reached into her pocket as she walked away from the common room and pulled out her hair ribbon. Winding it through her hair, she set off at a brisk pace to the library. She entered the enormous room a few minutes later and walked deep into the back of the library, heading for her window.

When she reached it she set her things down on her table and headed towards the bookshelves. She wandered aimlessly through row upon row of books, taking her time. She loved the smell of the library, the quiet noises coming from everywhere and the peace of it all. Running her fingers lightly over the spines of the books, she hummed softly to herself, searching for the ones she needed. She had come to do research but perhaps could put aside a little time for some light reading.

Advancing farther into another row of books, she came across a secluded area with a dead-end, the shelves around it crammed with volumes she had never seen before. She gave a little hum of delight and pulled several out, reading the titles. One particular text, *The History and Secrets of the Ancient Runes* caught her immediate attention. Hermione pushed a chair aside and hopped up onto the ledge on the bookcase to sit, lightly resting her back against the spines of the books. Opening the tome with a satisfying crinkle of the old spine, she thought she heard footsteps nearby but shook it off. No one ever came all the way back here.

Cormac had been sitting at a table in a dark part of the library by the entrance when he had seen her enter. Hermione had walked quietly past the tables and check out desk, averting her gaze from everyone else, going straight to the back of the library. She hadn't noticed him stand up and follow her slowly from a distance, weaving in between tables and bookcases, hadn't noticed when she dropped her quill from her bag, he'd swooped down and picked it up, tucking it into his pocket.

He had followed her into the darkest recesses of the library, where he stumbled upon her little hideaway. He didn't have a clue as to where she'd gone; she'd taken a turn and lost him in the maze of books. Stepping lightly, he made his way over to the window seat and sat down, prepared to wait as long as it took for the witch to come back out.

By then Hermione had gathered an intimidating amount of books and her fingers tickled with anticipation to read them all. She carried a stack and levitated the other to follow her back to her little nook.

She was so busy focusing on not dropping the other stacks she didn't notice the person sitting by the window until she'd safely charmed the floating stacks of books onto her table.

But then she saw his figure by the window and she jumped violently, thinking him to be a certain Slytherin. Her books crashed to the floor, landing on her feet, causing her to moan in pain. The figure advanced and she held out her wand, rushing out a warning for him to stay back.

He approached slowly, hands in the air, and she finally realized who it was.

“Merlin, Cormac. You scared me!” she gave a weak laugh and dropped down into the nearest chair, her shoulders sagging with relief.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that. I saw you come in, and followed because you dropped your quill.” He held it out to her as he spoke. His face turned serious when he noticed she was glancing around nervously. “Everything alright?”

She smiled up at him and took it. “Yes, I’m fine, thank you.” She couldn’t tell him the reason she was so nervous was because she had thought Malfoy had followed her here. “Thanks. You seem to have a knack for finding my lost things.”

“Well, I do what I can to help.”

This was the friendliest he had been in months since she’d rejected him. Hermione relaxed.

“Were you waiting here this whole time? I was over there for a long time! I’m sorry you had to wait that long.”

He waved away her apology. “No worries, Granger. It’s simple charity. But now that you’re here, I’ve been meaning to ask: Will you go to the ball with me?”

Hermione blushed.

“Oh... I’m going with Harry. Sorry.”

“Beaten again,” he said, looking chagrined. “Perhaps you’ll save me a dance or two?”

Hermione smiled. “Of course, Cormac. What are friends for?”

He seemed a little displeased but smiled.

“Excellent. See you then.”

He left, his mood black, angry he had not asked sooner.

Hermione sighed, letting herself slip down further into the chair. She’d come here for peace and had ended up with more trouble.

Returning to the Head Common Room several hours later, Hermione almost collided into Harry, who had been looking for her to see if she wanted to go down to dinner together, as Ron was busy elsewhere with Lavender again. As they walked back down to the Great Hall, Hermione noticed Harry seemed troubled. He looked tired and overwrought, his hair was even messier than usual; as though he’d pushed his hand through it too many times.

“Harry, are you alright?” she asked softly. He shook his head, closing his eyes for a second.

“The dreams are coming back,” he said. “I keep seeing Sirius die, and then it’ll flash to the Astronomy tower, where there’s a group of people. I know it’s something bad is going to happen, but I can’t hear what they’re saying, and I don’t know who they are. I’ve got a bad feeling about it, Hermione. Something’s coming.”

A dreadful shiver made its way down Hermione’s spine. With effort, she pushed her fear aside and grabbed his hand, squeezing it softly. Her other hand came up and rested on his shoulder, cupping his neck.

“I’m so sorry, Harry. About Sirius,” she clarified when he looked at her questioningly, “I know it’s awful, but you need to go tell Professor Dumbledore. Even if it’s just a trick or an odd dream, it must mean something, especially if Hogwarts is threatened.”

She could see the worry in his green eyes. “What if it’s another trick from Voldemort? What if he’s just trying to lure me someplace else so he can finish me off? What if someone else dies because of me?” His voice cracked, and he looked at her desperately, fighting the memories of that horrible night when his godfather had been murdered.

“What if it’s not a trick, Harry, and something really is going to happen? You saved Mr. Weasley’s life, perhaps you can save another, should anything happen. Whatever it is, you have to tell Dumbledore.”

Harry didn’t move for a long time, his eyes half-closed. Hermione could practically see the war waging inside his head, counted the seconds patiently as they ticked by. Finally, Harry nodded; a small nod she caught just in time.

“After dinner.” He agreed and led her down to the Great Hall entrance. “But I need to go alone.”

Hermione wanted to protest, but she understood this time. She stood on her toes, reaching to hug him, but at that second someone pushed past her roughly, catching her off balance, sending her falling to the floor.

Hermione fell on her backside with a grunt and looked up, dizzy. “What the hell?”

“McGonagall wants to see us after dinner, Granger,” she heard Malfoy say from above her.

“Apologize, Malfoy,” Harry snapped as he helped her up. “You shoved her on purpose!”

“Maybe if the Mudblood did something with that rat’s nest on her head, I wouldn’t have thought it were some enormous beast.”

Harry aimed his wand at Malfoy, who mirrored his actions. “You’re full of shite.”

Malfoy laughed. “Maybe I ought to give you a fall, too. What do you say, Potter? Maybe if I hit you hard enough all that funny stuff in your head will go away.”

Hermione straightened her skirt and shot a venomous look at the blond wizard.

“Come on, Harry. He’s not worth it.” She put her hand on his arm and lowered it gently, walking with him into the Great Hall without another glance at the Slytherin.

Hands shaking with anger, Draco sent a jinx to the nearest potted plant, which burst into flame. Luckily, there were no students around to witness his behavior. He ran his hand

through his hair, baring his teeth at the floor. That had been an utterly stupid thing to do, but when he saw her about to hug Potter, he couldn't control himself, he'd simply rushed over and shoved her to the floor in one fluid motion before she could lay a single finger on him. But she'd done so anyway after she'd gotten up from the floor.

I'm losing control. She's turning me into some sort of beast.

His stomach growled impatiently. Straightening his hair and robes, he closed his eyes and counted to twenty before entering the Great Hall.

He seated himself beside Blaise and immediately began to fill his plate.

"What kept you?" Blaise asked.

Draco shook his head. "Head business. Granger and I have got a meeting with McGonagall after this."

His friend regarded him curiously. "There's something bothering you. Something else."

Draco said nothing.

Blaise lowered his voice. "Is it about her?"

Draco stopped, his fork halfway to his mouth. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

"She's seeing Potter, isn't she?"

Draco worked his jaw and glared at the ceiling.

"By your silence, I'll take that as a yes. Unfortunate. Did you tell her how you feel?"

"This isn't about sentiment, Blaise. Feelings have nothing to do with this."

Blaise took a drink from his goblet. "Well, I take it now that Potter's in the mix, your chances just dropped lower."

"Talk about something else," Draco said stiffly.

"Fine. How goes the progress on the mission?" Blaise dipped a piece of bread into his onion soup.

"Better than your relationship with Pansy at the moment."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "That may be true, but we're talking about you at the moment, not my relationship. I suppose it's going well, then."

"Well enough. It's set for the Spring."

"Goodness, you've been busy."

"I want it to work, don't I."

Blaise brought his elbows onto the table and leaned in. "You're doing this because you want her as your reward?"

Draco glanced at her. "Yes."

"I didn't think you'd actually go for it," Blaise scratched his neck. "You think He'd say yes?"

Draco tore his eyes away from her at last. "As long as I do what he wants he should have no reason to say no."

"Who are you going to the ball with, Luna?"

Bright, cloudy blue eyes looked up at Hermione, a mysterious smile gracing her pale face.

"Neville asked me a week ago," she stated in her dreamy voice.

Hermione beamed. "That's wonderful, Luna!"

Luna looked down the long table to where Neville sat, poring over another Herbology book. "He knows all about Nargles and Pinky Puffwinks. Makes for such pleasant conversations."

"I'm sure it does. I'm glad you two are going together." Hermione shivered, feeling a familiar stare on her back.

"Is something bothering you, Hermione? Or someone?"

A guilty flush crept its way up Hermione's neck. Clearing her throat, she took a sip of her pumpkin juice and tried to look confused.

"Nothing's bothering me, Luna. I'm just stressed about the ball. I want it to be perfect."

Not entirely true, not entirely false. It would do.

Luna's wide, knowing eyes told her she wasn't fooling anyone, but luckily didn't push the subject. Reaching for the treacle tart, she fixed Hermione with her steady, unwavering gaze and said, "There's no such thing as perfect."

Hermione decided not to reply, leaving Luna to her desert. She ate in a moody silence until dinner was over, and she saw Malfoy rising from his seat.

Better get this over with, then, she thought resignedly and stood up, going to Harry before she left.

"Don't be afraid," she whispered into his ear and gave him a hard hug. Harry squeezed her arm gently.

"Be careful around Malfoy," he warned her in a low voice. Hermione nodded and pulled away gently, giving him a reassuring smile over her shoulder as she walked over to Malfoy, who was waiting with a scowl on his face.

"Good, I was just about to collect you," he said.

"I don't need you hanging over my shoulder," she replied.

They reached McGonagall's office quickly, not a word spoken between them on the way there. Upon entering, Hermione looked around the familiar room with a sense of pride. Extremely unlike Umbridge's office, McGonagall's had no frills, no lace, and certainly

nothing that was pink or held an image of a kitten. The room was clean and organized; the décor was simple yet gave the room a cozy feel. A Gryffindor banner hung above her desk.

“Good, you’re here,” McGonagall said. “I trust everything is ready for the ball?” She looked at them from the tops of her spectacles.

They nodded.

“Very well. Now, I’m sure you remember at the last Yule ball, the four champions opened the ball with the first dance. Seeing as there is no Triwizard Tournament this year, Professor Dumbledore has requested that the Head Boy and Girl open the ball with the first dance.”

Hermione’s heart dropped to her feet. She opened her mouth but was cut off by McGonagall, who continued, “I am aware this may not be favorable for either of you, but it is mandatory. Professor Dumbledore wishes you two to display unity before the entire school. You two will dance the opening dance and after that, you may pretend it never happened if you so wish. Is that clear?”

Her sharp eyes stared them down.

“Yes, Professor,” Malfoy said.

“...Yes, Professor.” Hermione couldn’t believe it.

“I trust both of you know enough about dancing to not make fools of yourselves at the ball and behave yourselves appropriately. I will not have any fights at this event.”

Malfoy looked at Hermione. “Of course. We’ll behave.”

McGonagall nodded.

“If needed, a quick dance lesson may be arranged for.”

She gave them each an inquiring look.

“I’ve been trained in the dance since I was a child, Professor,” Draco said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. *Of course you were.*

“And you, Ms. Granger?”

“I’ve taken classes in ballet and other forms of dance in my childhood, Professor. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Professor McGonagall nodded and stood from her chair. “Very well. Please be sure to be on your best behavior tomorrow, and inform me if you have need of anything else for the event.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

They exited the room. Hermione closed the door behind her, grimacing.

Draco stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Well. Things have gotten more interesting.”

Hermione cast him a dark look and walked on.

“Tell me, Granger. Have you really taken dance lessons?”

Hermione turned back to look at him. “Of course I have. Are you hard of hearing or do you think I’m lying?”

Draco fixed his gaze ahead on the path they were taking back to their dorms. “I find myself a little dubious. Can you dance?”

She regarded him, irritation evident in her features.

“We already went over this. Yes, I know how to dance.”

He shook his head. “No, little bird.” He grinned to himself as she visibly bristled at the pet name. “We’ve already established that you know how to dance. The question is, *can* you? Rather, are you any good? Because I wouldn’t want to embarrass myself tomorrow when you’re stumbling over your own feet.”

Hermione stopped walking and looked him in the eye. “You’ll find out tomorrow, won’t you?” she replied, and turned the corner to the next hallway, leaving him alone in the corridor.

The Great Hall had been magically decorated, magically made bigger so there would be enough room for everyone to dance and be comfortable. Christmas trees, courtesy of Hagrid, had been set up in every corner and decorated by Professor Flitwick, who was still adding the finishing touches. Tables and chairs outlined the room, leaving a large, wide space in the middle of the whole room for the dancing to take place. Everlasting Icicles adorned the walls and the grand staircase. Candles floated in the spelled ceiling that boasted a beautiful night sky from which snow rained softly down, disappearing as soon as it hit the ground. The falling snow gave everything a dream-like appearance.

Hermione stood at the entrance and smiled happily. Classes had cut short that day. Everyone was in a festive mood. She would rather have had the full day of classes but enjoyed the extra time regardless. She had gone over everything twice to make sure each and every detail was perfect and in place. Malfoy had joined her after lunch to do his part. He seemed disinterested in everything, distracted, even, but had made no mistakes and that made things easier. They had two hours until the event began, and she had to go get ready. She went to him and he looked at her.

His pale eyes were so hard to read, sometimes. She didn’t particularly like looking into them—never really had. Sometimes, they seemed a little off. Perhaps it was their unusual color. It could have been his cold demeanor. But they had a strange power and sometimes she felt herself sucked into his gaze like they were mouths wanting to feed. In both instances of the forced kisses, his eyes had frightened her. She remembered being struck by his eyes the first time she had met him and they had been cold then, but something had changed in them since recently and she couldn’t explain it—and it wasn’t just his eyes, at that, but his entire person that had changed for the worse. Handsome as he was, were she a more timid person she would have avoided looking him in the eye at all costs. But she had never been afraid of him and would not start now, so she looked at him and would not let herself look away.

“I’m leaving now,” she explained. “I need to go get dressed. Send word if anything goes wrong.” He nodded, his gaze lingering on her a second longer, and turned back.

Hermione went for the dorm and headed as quickly as she could for the bathtub. Stripping, she let the warm water run and let her hair down, sprinkling lavender oil into the water. Stepping in, she sighed as the hot water relieved the tension in her muscles, leaning her head back onto the lip of the bathtub. The lavender scent enveloped her, calming her mind. It was her favorite scent in the world, other than fresh parchment and old books. Her mother used to bring fresh stalks of lavender from the outdoor market, placing them into her pillowcases to help calm her before she slept. It was a scent she strongly associated with her childhood—that, and the sterile clean smell of a dental office.

A faint smile curved Hermione's lips; she reached for the sponge and began to rub at her skin. It wouldn't do to get all emotional and homesick now, she was working to beat the clock.

When she emerged from the bath, she toweled herself off quickly, wincing at a twinge of pain from a bruise on her hip, and hurried to dress. The dress she had chosen was pink, like a faint blush on a porcelain doll. The neckline dipped into a modest sweetheart neckline, and the sash around her waist was a darker plum color. Its ends tied into a loose bow on the small of her back. The skirt went down to her feet, covering her simple black heels. Already they were hurting her feet—she was sorely tempted to exchange them for her trainers but could already imagine Malfoy's ridicule, so in the end, the only thing she could do was to try and remember a charm to ease the discomfort.

Ginny had dared her to wear something more daring and had chosen one for her to try on that had a slit on the thigh and a cutout between her breasts. Hermione had admired the dress but could not feel comfortable in it—it just wasn't her style, and she wasn't comfortable wearing something that revealed so much.

Hermione didn't bother with any jewelry. It was a little known fact that she did not like necklaces. Necklaces reminded her of collars, of slaves and chains. She would get anxious and could practically feel the jewelry start to tighten around her throat, squeezing her windpipes. She would never admit it, but they even frightened her a little. They made her feel trapped. The fear was irrational to its core, but she didn't care. Her grandmother had bought her a gold necklace when she had turned fourteen and Hermione only wore it when she came to visit.

She had left her hair loose, not bothering to style it other than having some of it pulled back at the nape of her neck. She'd placed several pins in her hair that had the same crystals attached to the end that were on her dress, so her hair sparkled softly in the light. She turned around, looking at herself in the mirror to make sure her undergarments weren't visible through the fabric of the dress, and satisfied, tucked her wand into the pocket sewn into the right side of her skirt.

A knock sounded on the door, followed by Harry calling her name.

Hermione opened the door and stepped out, focusing on not tripping, her face lighting up with a smile when she saw Harry, Ron, and Lavender standing there waiting for her.

Harry appeared not to be able to find his voice. Hermione tried not to giggle.

“You look—you look great,” Harry said, fighting the awkwardness that forced its way into his voice.

Hermione blushed, sensing his sincerity. “You do, too.”

Lavender hurried over, beaming. “Hermione Granger! You’ve done it again!” she laughed and quickly hugged a confused Hermione, who hugged her back and complimented her on her dress as well. Ron shuffled forward and gave Hermione a bear hug that left her gasping for air as he set her back down on her feet.

“You look great, Hermione.”

“Thanks,” she said, wobbling on her feet as she tried to steady herself after his hug.

Ron grinned, tucking Lavender’s arm back into his own.

Harry held out his arm, looking at his date. “Ready?”

Hermione smiled and tucked her own arm into his. “Ready.”

Draco stood outside the Great Hall, wishing the event was already over, or that he at least didn’t have to attend. The only thing keeping him there was the promise of that dance with Granger. Blaise was making small talk, but he wasn’t keen on conversation just now. His voice blended into all the other noise filling up the area. Daphne stood next to him, stunning in a dark green silk dress cut to the current fashion. Pansy held on to Blaise’s arm, looking around at all the other girls walking by with their dates, secretly judging their outfits.

“Are you ready to go in yet?” Daphne asked.

Draco shook his head. “You go in if you’d like. I’ll meet you inside soon.” He kissed the back of her hand and she left. Pansy followed Daphne, looking bored.

He ignored Blaise, who was smirking at him. Only Blaise knew the reason for his lingering out here.

A shift in mood caught his attention, and his eyes snapped to Blaise, who raised his eyebrows and jerked his head in the direction of the central staircase, where he noticed Weasley and Lavender Brown make their way down the stairs. He looked back at Blaise, scowling, as if to say, *So?* But his eyes went back to the stairs, searching for what he’d obviously missed, and he saw her at last. Immediately he felt his pulse quicken at the sight of her, his hands went slack. His eyes roved up and down her figure, drinking her in.

She was blushing, her deep brown eyes sparkling in the light of the room. That modest little dress—Gods, she was a tease. He would be imagining her figure all night in that gown—luckily for him, he’d already had ample opportunity to see it and feel it up close, in private. He’d never wanted to fuck her more. The color of her dress made her look like she was in a permanent blush; her soft, lush lips parted in a smile as she laughed at something her date said.

Her date.

His eyes narrowed when he caught a glimpse of who it was.

Of course, he thought snidely.

Dressed rather handsomely, he had to admit. Almost as well as himself, who wore an elegant black suit with a black tie. But his muscles tensed and a snarl ripped out of his chest when Potter had the audacity to wrap his arm around Granger's waist and led her down the staircase and to the far corner, where Weasley and Brown were waiting.

Blaise was next to him in an instant, placing his hand on his arm.

"Calm down." He hissed. "D'you want the whole bloody school to notice?"

Draco shook his arm off and stood still, looking around him. No one had noticed.

A clearing of throat demanded his attention, and he turned to see Professor McGonagall standing behind him.

"When you have finished chatting with your friends, Mr. Malfoy, I'd like to get this ball started." She moved across the room to collect and chastise Granger.

Draco let out an impatient puff of air from his nose and motioned for Blaise to enter the Great Hall without him. The Gryffindors were approaching.

Feigning indifference and disdain, Malfoy called out, "Dating celebrities again, Granger? I thought you knew better." He smirked when she turned her large, lovely eyes onto him, though they were frowning in annoyance. Potter pulled her away, shielding her from his view.

"Piss off, Malfoy." He called back, and they walked into the ballroom.

Malfoy stared after them angrily. Damn Potter. Granger was *his*.

He walked into the room sometime after, seeking out Daphne and standing by her side. The room buzzed with the chatter of the students, humming with energy.

The Headmaster stepped up before the congregation, holding out his open palms for silence. "Girls and boys, I welcome you to the Christmas Ball, which celebrates the end of another year, though not necessarily the end of the school year," he added when the students burst into applause. "Without further ado, I introduce Head Boy and Head Girl, Ms. Hermione Granger and Mr. Draco Malfoy, as they both planned this event and will open the dance floor with the opening dance."

A smattering of applause filled the room, and Harry tensed beside her. "You have to dance with him? Why didn't you tell me?" he asked in a low voice.

Ron leaned in close. "No bloody way, he'll probably try to hex you or trip you or something. Whose idea was this?"

"I didn't tell you, because you wouldn't have liked it anyway. It's just a dance, please don't lose your heads over this," she whispered. They weren't even paying attention to her, they were staring straight ahead, their expressions disbelieving.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Everyone around them had gone silent. She turned, full of dread.

Malfoy waited there with his hand out for her to take. His eyes were cold and hard, but there was something darker lurking past the surface—she fought the instinct to step back. His lips moved.

“Take my hand, Granger.”

Shocked whispers broke out all around the room. Hermione looked around nervously, grit her teeth and placed her hand in his, shuddering at how cold his hand was. She could hear the whispers and murmurs all around her, could feel the heat of her friends’ eyes on her back.

Just one dance, just one dance, she repeated in her mind. *Then it’s over.*

He led her to the center of the room, where a wide space had been formed for them. They faced each other.

He placed one hand on her waist, spreading his fingers, and raised their hands into the air, ready to dance. Hermione was reminded of his hand around her neck, preventing her from moving as he kissed her.

He smiled without warmth. “You look well tonight. I hope you are as good a dancer as you say.”

She looked up at him, distrust showed plainly in her eyes.

“One wrong move,” she whispered, “One wrong move, one wrong touch, Malfoy, and I swear I will go to McGonagall.”

She tried to keep herself a modest distance away but he wasn’t having any of it. With the hand on her waist, he brought her closer to him with one sharp movement. Hermione gasped and was on the verge of pushing away when she remembered they were surrounded by people and he gave her hand a painful squeeze, as if warning her to stay put.

Malfoy’s grip on her was sure and almost frightening, like he knew he was hurting her in front of everyone and knew no one would notice. Hermione looked around, highly uncomfortable. She wished she’d never agreed to this, tradition or not—this fear wasn’t worth it. She felt like she’d walked into a trap. She wanted to push him away, make him release her, even break his hands if necessary. She wanted to run, but his hands held her in place.

“Will you really, little bird?” Malfoy asked. “She is watching us now and seems not to have an issue with the way I’m holding you.”

Hermione knew Malfoy’s words were only an attempt at manipulation. Still, she glanced around. Nobody seemed alarmed, or suspicious. Their faces were blank and waiting. She couldn’t see Harry or Ron.

“Why do you keep calling me that? Stop it.”

He merely smirked.

She glared at him, refusing to reply as she placed her hand on his shoulder.

The music began, and they started dancing. His long legs should have made it hard for her to catch up, but he found with a mild surprise that she matched him stride for stride, moving with a beautiful grace only a dancer could muster.

Light applause broke out and grew louder as Professor Dumbledore led Professor McGonagall out onto the floor. That being the ice-breaker, more and more couples began to enter the dance floor and the conversation started up again, blending into the music.

Hermione looked around and smiled at Neville, who was clumsily twirling Luna. She spotted Ron and Lavender dancing nearby, and almost laughed when Ron glared at Malfoy and mouthed to her, 'I've got your back'. But as if Malfoy had seen it, too, his grip on her tightened, and Hermione felt it die in her throat.

Her beauty amazed him. She wasn't even bothering to look at him, instead, she was looking around the dance floor as they moved, smiling at her friends. Each time her lips curved into a fresh smile, he felt the overwhelming urge to back her into a wall and attack her mouth with his own. Her lavender scent wafted up to his nose and his mouth watered, longing for another taste of her skin. Already he was aching for her, and the first dance wasn't even half over yet.

"You dance well. So you weren't lying, then."

She arched an eyebrow at him as he twirled her. "You really thought I was lying?"

"No, but you still manage to surprise me, sometimes," he said. "I'm glad to know I'm not embarrassing myself dancing with you."

She regarded him coolly, moving her mouth to the side.

"And who did you train with, then?" she asked, tilting her chin up to meet his eye. He could see the tops of her breasts and those perfect lips... by Salazar, he wanted her. The snowflakes falling from the ceiling dusted her skin and hair, disappearing seconds after they melted.

"A famous dance instructor from France. He was good friends with my parents, and his wedding gift to them was a lifetime of lessons for me, free of charge." He shot her a contemptuous grin as she rolled her eyes. "Malfoys always have the best." His voice was lower, and his smile hardened, his eyes fixed on her heart-shaped face.

Hermione's skin prickled, and she tore her eyes from his to land on Harry, who was standing nearby, speaking to Professor Slughorn unenthusiastically.

"Where did you learn, Granger?" he asked. He'd caught the way she'd longingly stared at Potter, and his hand had tightened around her waist. She glanced down sharply in pain and tried to regain some distance between their bodies. He only stepped in closer, their chests touching.

She reached up to push him away, and he obliged this time.

"Anyone can see," she hissed. "Don't you dare start this again."

"Let them see," he said, unaffected. "This is only a dance and nothing more."

But his hands and eyes said otherwise.

"Remember what I told you," she hissed as they executed another complicated turn.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and watched her form greedily as he twirled her. Her bum was delectable, he longed to give it a good, hard smack. She came back into his arms (he noticed the immense look of unease on her face), and the music ended, to her relief and his disappointment.

She did the barest of curtsies and he bowed, keeping their eyes locked. Applause filled their ears.

“Dance one more with me,” he said, holding out his hand again. “Think of the raptures it’ll give the Headmaster.”

She looked at him disdainfully. “I would rather eat a Blast-Ended Skrewt.”

He grinned, caught her hand and pulled her to him, ignoring her sharp protest, thanking the Gods that the dance floor was packed and no one would notice. Her hip was delicious in his hand—he wanted to squeeze the sweet flesh, caress it in his palm, but felt that would be pushing it. Her rage was a fearsome thing, and he was sure he didn’t want to provoke it here in front of so many, where she’d have everyone’s support and he would be thrown in the dust. No, this was better done in private.

“Let me go before I take out your eye,” she said stiffly, reaching for her wand.

“It’s only a dance,” he repeated. “Don’t grab your wand, if you curse me here, you’ll spoil the ball for everyone and we both will face some uncomfortable questions.”

She moved along with him reluctantly. “Has it not occurred to you that might be just what I want?”

He looked skeptical. “Is it? The word would spread. It would be a scandal, everyone would know before morning. You know how people misinterpret information. ‘Malfoy assaulted Granger! No, Malfoy snogged Granger! No, they kissed!’ They’ll believe whatever is easier to speak of. They’re easy to influence.”

She went pale. “You’d go that far to protect yourself?”

He smiled thinly, his hand sliding back up to her waist. “Farther.”

She stopped moving, and he was forced to stop but did not release her. Hand on her stomach, she looked like she was about to be sick.

“What do you *want* from me?” she pulled away from him, stumbling over her own dress. “Why go to these lengths?”

“I thought it would be obvious by now, what I want from you,” he said.

Draco walked towards her and she scrambled away backward. Other couples around them continued dancing obliviously. The music was too loud. Malfoy came to a stop in front of her and properly frightened, Hermione reached for her wand.

“May I cut in?” Potter asked politely, but Draco could hear the menace in his voice. He went to Granger at once, who grabbed onto his arm with no hesitation.

Draco sneered at them. “About time someone took her off my hands. I was about ready to hang myself.”

Angry, afraid and relieved to be free of him, Hermione curtsied again.

“I wish you’d mentioned that to me so I might have helped you with that myself,” she said and left without looking back. Incredulous, Potter looked like he wanted to add something, but left, still with an expression of amazement at Granger’s boldness.

Draco grinned and watched them go. She’d completely ignored his insult and had given him class and cheek. If Potter hadn’t barged in he would have found a way to get her out of this room and somewhere private where he could snog her and not worry about others seeing.

Two dances later, Hermione laughed, finally at ease. She’d danced once with Harry after Malfoy, and once with Ron after that. Harry twirled her and she spun gracefully, her dress fanning out around her and then wrapping itself around her legs before settling back down.

Harry looked at his best friend and wondered if she really did like him back. He hadn’t really clarified whether this was a date or not, but did it really need explaining? They were having fun. She must have been as confused as he was, though.

I want more, he thought. *But what if this ruins our friendship if she says no?* He gave her a quick smile when she smiled up at him, resting her head against his chest gingerly as if seeing whether he was okay with it or not. He brought his hands up to her back as if to give her a green light.

Hermione had always loved Harry—to be clear, from the start she had never seen him as anything other than a great friend, but something had changed recently and she didn’t know how or why. They had always been close and she appreciated how he always listened to her and supported her when Ron didn’t. He was patient even when she was being trying (and she knew she could be, at times) and when they lost their temper at each other they always apologized. There had always been that respect and admiration between them—she didn’t know what his motive was in asking her to be his date for the dance, but if his thoughts were romantically inclined, she had to admit she was starting to lean that way, too. His green eyes were so calm and warm behind his glasses, when he looked at her she felt understood. They’d had no trouble holding hands or hugging before as just friends—had all of that been building up leading to something like this? She knew he was handsome but as a friend, had seen his features objectively but now as they danced she found herself taken with his jet-black hair, the vividness of his eyes, the structure of his face—the scar half-hidden on his forehead.

His hands around her felt warm and strong. They had hugged so many times before but now, everything was different. Hermione struggled to find a way to explain it in her mind but couldn’t. All she knew was that she felt safe and happy and that his eyes were soft and looking at her in the same way she must have been looking at him.

She found herself going red.

“This is nice,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “Thanks for coming with me. I know you’ve been busy and we haven’t talked as much as we usually do, but I meant it when I said I’ve missed

you.”

She smiled, touched. “Well, we’re here, now.”

“True—” he opened his mouth as if wanting to say something else, but didn’t. Hermione looked at him curiously, sensing what he had been about to say.

If he can’t, then I will. Someone’s got to. Merlin help me if I’m wrong and misread all this.

“Are we here as friends?” She asked softly, their dancing turning into more of a slow sway to the music.

He blinked.

“Do you want to be here as friends?”

“No. Do you?”

“No.” He looked away briefly. “I was hoping when I asked you that we could come as something more. I should have been more clear. Sorry.”

“I did wonder,” she admitted. “But I’m glad it’s cleared up now.”

“I was afraid of ruining everything.”

“I think I was, too, which is why I didn’t ask about it earlier.”

The song ended, and applause broke out. Hermione clapped along with the others and paused in surprise when Harry leaned in and kissed her on the cheek gently. His face was slightly red when he pulled back.

“Do you want to go get something to drink?” He asked, offering his arm to her.

“Yes.” She took it, and they walked out of the dancing area and to the back of the room, pretending not to notice the whispers and pointed fingers that followed them as they walked past.

Harry had gone off to the loo and Hermione was drinking some water off by herself when someone tapped on her shoulder. She turned cautiously, not knowing who to expect.

Cormac grinned at her.

“You promised me a dance.”

“I did,” she said, feeling less than enthused. She put her cup away.

“I’ve got you at last, Granger,” he said, settling his hands around Hermione. Hermione smiled back, but a curious smell caught her attention. She sniffed the air around Cormac and frowned.

“Have you been drinking?” she whispered.

Cormac shrugged. “Just a bit tipsy, love. Our friend Seamus brought some of his own punch and spread some around. I wasn’t aware of what it was at first, but now I suppose it’s too late.”

Hermione looked over to the food tables, where Seamus was pouring himself a hearty cup of punch. "I should go throw that out. Do you know how long it's been that way?"

"Don't do this now, Hermione," he pleaded. "It's almost Christmas! We're supposed to celebrate!" He leaned in, the hand on her waist lowering to her hip and Hermione backed away, sweat breaking out over her skin.

"Cormac, let me go, please. You're drunk, you wouldn't be acting this way normally."

She gasped when he caught her wrists and pulled her body against his. "Care to bet on that, Granger?" he slurred, looking hard into her wide eyes. "You always act like you're too bloody good for everyone else. Shoot me down for thinking you're attractive! Well, you know what? I think you're bloody beautiful, and I'll show you why you should go out with me." Hermione blanched at his words, forgetting to fight back.

He swooped in and was about to kiss her when her brain turned back on and she turned her head at the last second, thinking back to how her first kiss had been taken from her.

His lips landed on her cheek but moved down towards the skin beneath her ear. Hermione sucked in a breath and pushed at his chest, but finding it useless, she raised her leg and stomped hard on his foot. He groaned and pushed her into the wall behind the nearest Christmas tree, shielding them from everyone's view.

"Stop!"

Rage spiked sharply within her. Hermione reached for her wand. She would be damned if she would let herself be harassed two times in one night. Enough was enough.

Cormac stumbled over himself as he tried pressing closer to her, lips still on her neck. Hermione pulled out her wand, shaking with fury. He grabbed her wand hand, and even in his drunkenness, he was strong enough to tear it out of her hold easily.

"Give it back!"

He bit her ear and she yelped in pain. Couldn't anybody hear her? He was holding her wand out of reach with one hand and her wrist with the other. Hermione pushed at his face with her free hand.

Not again, not again!

He moved to kiss her again. Hermione raised her fist and threw all her energy into it. It caught him in the nose—he howled and slumped backward, falling onto his back. He held his nose with both hands. Blood spurted out between his fingers.

Hermione edged around him, fighting to control her panicked breathing. Her hand burned with pain but she hardly felt it. A bit of his blood had stained her dress—she looked down at it, dazed.

"Hermione, there you are! Merlin, what happened?"

She looked behind her at the source of the voice and found Neville, who approached her quickly. Dazed, she looked up at her friend.

“He assaulted me. I broke his nose.” She picked her wand up from where he had dropped it. It felt so good to say out loud! She found herself wanting to find Malfoy at that exact moment so she could give him the same treatment. But she was still shaking.

“Gods. Are you okay?” Neville touched her shoulder gently.

She wiped at her neck. “I’m alright, I think... I should report him.”

Cormac was still the floor, groaning.

“What did you break my nose for?” He was asking.

Neville scowled down at him. “I’ll get McGonagall.”

“Not here,” she said quickly. “I don’t want to do it here.”

“Of course. I’ll get Harry and Ron.” He startled when she jumped, reaching out to grasp his sleeve.

“Please don’t mention it to them; I don’t want them to worry. Just tell them I took ill and needed to lie down, and they musn’t come after me. Please tell Harry I’ll see him tomorrow.” She pleaded, tucking her wand back into her pocket.

Neville sighed and nodded, then looked at the half-unconscious wizard on the floor. “What about him?”

Hermione glared at Cormac and drew her wand. “Incarcerous.”

Ropes appeared and restrained Cormac, who rolled onto his side, glaring at them both.

“What if someone finds him?”

“If they have enough sense, they’ll leave him alone.”

They walked out from behind the tree together, she with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, shaking. Neville noticed, and at the door, before they parted, he hugged her. Hermione went immediately to a loo to assess any damage and Neville dove back into the party to find the Head of House and let her know what had happened, and where to find the culprit.

A curious pair of brown eyes watched the two people closely as they spoke and when one left, and the other made his way to Potter and Weasley, saying something that left them both obviously worried. One made to leave after the girl immediately, but the messenger held him back, repeating something firmly, to which Potter hung back, confused and defeated. This was certainly interesting news to Blaise; he smiled as he watched.

Draco’s going to have a fit...

He walked away quickly, intent to deliver the news to his friend.

After meeting with McGonagall, Hermione left her office feeling really drained. The Professor had asked her to repeat everything that had happened and it was bad enough to live through the encounter, but worse still to talk about it. McGonagall had heard Neville’s

testimony as well. Both he and Hermione had willingly supplied their memories of the event when asked, though she loathed having to relive it so soon after. The damning evidence warranted there was no need to question Cormac. He had been sobered up with some potions and had his nose healed, but because of other similar reports on his record he had been expelled, and the last Hermione saw of him he was waiting for his parents to come at McGonagall's urging via Floo.

Hermione had been about to bring up Malfoy and his assaults as well when an emergency back downstairs regarding another student affected by Seamus's punch had cut the meeting's end abruptly and McGonagall had left, reminding Hermione to not hesitate to reach out if anything else happened. Figuring she had gone through enough for one night anyway and could come back the second they came back from their holiday break, Hermione had left, her fist still hurting from the punch, and ran into Ginny, who was just coming down the stairs.

Ginny took one look at her face and came straight over. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Don't lie, Hermione," Ginny sounded a bit wounded. "You know you can trust me."

Hermione felt her heart ache.

Ginny sat down on the stairs, pushing the skirt of her navy blue dress out of the way, and patted the cold stone in an invitation for Hermione to join her. Hermione hesitated. The corridor and surrounding area were empty. She sat, feeling weary.

"What happened?" Ginny asked gently. "Did my brother say something mean again?"

"No—" She *wished* that had been the case. Her hands played nervously in her lap, twisting at her fingers. "Have... have you ever had attention you don't want from someone you don't like?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes. Is that what's going on, now?"

Hermione nodded. "What did you do about it?"

"I told them I didn't want it. Some of them were decent and didn't bother me again. There's always a persistent bastard who won't take no for an answer, though. I put him on the other end of my wand and he left me alone from there on."

She had already tried all that. Her hands continued to fidget. "What if I already told them I don't like them, and I've defended myself, and they do it anyway?"

Ginny went still. "Then I think that person has a serious problem and should be reported." She paused. "How long has this been happening?"

"Since the start of term," Hermione said.

"You're sure you're okay? Have you been hurt?"

"I'm fine," Hermione said automatically. "I reported the person."

And I'll report the second as soon as I can.

“Oh, good.” Ginny sounded relieved. “I know it’s hard to deal with. The first time it ever happened to me I didn’t say anything for a long time because I was so embarrassed, but it just got worse. By the end, before I reported it, I was afraid of doing that, too, because I worried people would accuse me of not reporting it sooner because I liked it.”

Hermione wiped at her eye. Ginny came closer and wrapped her arms around her.

“Is that how you’ve been feeling?”

Hermione nodded, crying. “I thought I could handle it on my own.”

“Maybe you can, but it’s always best to report it,” Ginny said, rubbing her back. “I’m glad you did, and I’m sorry this happened to you.”

Hermione hugged her back tightly. “I’m sorry it’s happened to you, too.”

11. Nightmare

Everything in his vision was a swirl of motion and color. As he moved with his partner he couldn't keep his eyes from straying. Seeking. By comparison, they were the best dancers out of the whole lot stumbling around the great room, he moved with pride and sureness and Daphne kept up with no trouble at all. Once or twice she had tried to start a conversation but Draco had not been in the mood for talk; though he'd had plans for bedding the witch after the ball now all he could think about was Granger, and in consequence ignored his partner, which left her in a darkened mood.

Daphne twisted suddenly in his grip and Draco glanced down in surprise but she had only turned to make a face at a friend who stood nearby and was now laughing. When she turned back her smile faded fast and their eyes met, Draco understood she had made fun of him. Before the dance her bright black eyes had shone with excitement and a hint of desire; now only contempt revealed itself. Draco understood his behavior had incited this, her pride was wounded and he should have apologized but he didn't care to. Daphne looked away at last and held her chin high, and didn't look at him for the remainder of the song.

Like a statue carved from marble she had a stately air and cold demeanor that drew others to her wherever she went but where Daphne was ice Hermione was fire, and even now, like a child lost in a dark forest his eyes sought her out, his burning flame, wherever she might be. He closed his eyes, bringing forth the memory of his little bird in his arms, twisting and moving her body along with his as gracefully as a ballerina. That luminous smile.

She would be his soon.

Taking upon Blaise's comment he'd written a letter to his father, informing him on his progress on his mission. He'd asked to inquire of the Dark Lord if he could bring himself a 'souvenir' if his mission went well. The reply had come quickly and the answer pleased Draco immensely.

The Dark Lord had agreed. In his words, according to his father, 'Draco may bring whatever souvenir he wishes from Hogwarts, should his mission be successful. However, do not let this distract from the mission at hand, or a heavy price must be paid.'

A cold shiver ran its way up his spine but he paid it no mind and turning back to the present, bowed as the dance ended. Daphne curtsied, and he took her hand and led her back to the tables and chairs in a secluded corner, where Blaise and Pansy were sitting. Fanning herself and looking rather cross, Pansy was talking to Blaise and pointedly not looking at him. Blaise didn't seem to care, but said something in reply and caught Draco's eye, then shifted his gaze to the side quickly. Draco nodded. Taking Daphne's hand and leading her to a seat, where she stiffly sat down and pointedly looked away from him, already calling to Pansy to sit with her. Draco cut his losses and didn't waste time saying goodbye but followed Blaise out of the room, his eyes still scanning the room for Granger.

Once Draco would have felt the sting of Daphne's indifference, even if he had caused it and would have become angry but he understood the damage had been done and Daphne had

moved on. He didn't care. He needed to find Granger. As he followed Blaise Draco caught a glimpse of Potter and Weasley, who appeared immensely worried, speaking to each other in low tones as Lavender Brown hovered nearby, unsure of what to do.

They walked a good distance away from the Great Hall, ending up on the second floor in a seldom-used classroom. Blaise held open the door and Draco stepped in quickly.

Blaise sat on the desk in front of the room, straightening his suit.

"Where is she?" Draco asked. "She wasn't with Potter or Weasley, and she wasn't on the dance floor either."

Blaise peered at him from the corner of his eye. "The last they saw her, she was dancing with Potter. I heard them talking; apparently that McLaggen fellow was dancing with her. I looked around a bit, though, and saw a bit of motion behind one of the Christmas trees. I was going to go investigate when Granger and Longbottom walked out from behind it. Both looked like they'd had a good snog, to be truthful. She was hugging him. He said something that alarmed her and by the looks of it, she was begging him for something. They kept looking over to Potter, and they both looked really worried. Granger left the hall and he went to speak with Potter, who looked worried after they spoke. Tried to go after her but Longbottom stopped him. Don't know why, I was too far away to hear anything."

Draco's fists clenched and he glared at Blaise. "Granger and Longbottom. You're sure." Blaise nodded.

Draco swore loudly and paced around the room, kicking at a chair that was unfortunate enough to be in his way. Hearing it clatter to the farther end of the room, he turned, narrowing his eyes at his friend.

"You're *absolutely* sure about this."

Blaise grinned. "When have I ever lied to you?" Draco slammed his hand on the desk. The other Slytherin didn't even flinch.

"You better not be lying about this, Zabini."

Blaise glared at him now, losing his patience. "D'you need a bloody Wizard's Oath? I'm not lying, for fuck's sake."

Draco nodded and stood up, his cold eyes distant.

"Did your father ever reply to your letter?" Blaise asked. Draco nodded. "What did he say?"

"The Dark Lord has approved of it so long as Dumbledore is dealt with."

"So you'll be taking her? The Mudblood, I mean."

Draco twitched at the word 'Mudblood' and nodded, turning back to the window.

"On the same day I complete my task."

"Does she know?" Blaise looked up, curious. "Any word on exactly when that will be?"

"Spring," was all Draco would say.

“Exactly how will you take her, though? She’ll be fighting with the Order, and she’s not an easy one to take down.”

“I know. We’ll overwhelm her and take her out. If that fails, I use Dumbledore as a bargaining tool.”

“But you’re supposed to kill him.”

“I know. And I will kill him, whether she agrees to come or not. If we fail in bringing her then I’m sure the Dark Lord will help me find a way to do so later on.”

“And you’re sure the Dark Lord will go to all this trouble just for one girl?” Blaise tried to keep the doubt from his voice and failed.

Draco’s eyes flashed. “She is bound to have valuable information. The Dark Lord would be a fool to not take advantage of that if he can’t get Potter.”

Blaise leaned back, mulling it all over. He swung his legs and stood up from the desk, clapping his hands.

“Sounds like a plan,” he announced.

After Hermione had asked Ginny not to tell anyone about their conversation, Ginny had gone back to the Great Hall and Hermione had opted to go to the library for some time alone. She was too tired to go all the way to the dorm to change out of her dress and was afraid of encountering Malfoy there so she went straight to her nook, unlocking the library doors when she was sure there was nobody around. During the questioning, she had almost told them about Malfoy’s harassment but had faltered when she realized that she would have to supply the memories of each instance as evidence, and while with Cormac she had only one, there were several concerning Malfoy.

What would they think of it all? She hated to think they would see what he had done to her as if felt more disturbing and personal than what Cormac had done to her. They would look at her memories and see that she had hardly fought back though not by her own intention. They would see that she had dealt with it in her own way, and through the time lapse between each assault they would see that she had chosen not to tell.

Would they assume she liked it? Would they think her weak? Stupid for falling for it so often? Worse... would they think she liked it like Malfoy had accused her of? His threats from their dance earlier floated back to her and added to her insecurity. To tell or not? She had felt so good in breaking Cormac’s nose, and while that high had lasted she had decided she would report Malfoy as well, but now that the high was gone she was left back to stewing in worry and doubt. In the end, she had said nothing else and was not sure that she had made the right choice. Ginny’s words had been a huge comfort. She had even offered to help Hermione report this unknown offender, but Hermione had declined. Tomorrow, everyone would be leaving early in the morning to head back home for the holiday. When they came back she would report Malfoy. It would not be easy, and he might retaliate as he had hinted, but Cormac’s assault had been the straw to break her back. She would build her courage in the meantime.

Ginny had not asked the identity of her attacker. Hermione figured she would learn about Cormac anyway when everyone else learned he had been expelled, and she could attribute their painful talk to him. The same would happen once she reported Malfoy and had him expelled, but for now, she wanted that cursed association to remain secret.

Now she was back in the empty corridor, hands cold and her feet aching from the dancing and from her hasty flight back up, she'd have liked to go slower but didn't want to be seen. Luckily, there hadn't been a single soul out of the great hall which made her smile bitterly. At least the ball had been a success. She hoped Malfoy would choke on his drink, wherever he was.

She entered the library swiftly and made sure to lock it behind her. It was warm inside but she was cold anyway. The silence of the room was deafening, crashing down around her ears like waves till her ears buzzed—or was that just the exhaustion? She walked past rows and rows of books, intent on reaching her nook.

Her eyes felt heavy and her face was itchy. She wiped at her cheeks, attempting to rub off the dry streams of tears. Her head spun and she barely made it to the window seat when the tears began to spill.

Anger at Cormac and Malfoy, embarrassment and worry for Harry, gratitude for Neville and Ginny spilled out of her eyes as she sobbed into the soft material of the cushions around her. She shook, wondering if Cormac would actually have gone so far as to rape her in his drunken stupor. It seemed likely. Malfoy's threat had resurfaced in her thoughts as well, as if the night had not gone badly enough. Her whole body shook, and she let it, for once letting her emotions run.

Malfoy's words would not leave her head. His hands on her body, too familiar, too restricting. The cold, heavy weight of his stare as they had danced. Cormac's lips on her face, her neck. She shuddered. Perhaps she should have gone to take a bath instead. A very hot one. She felt gross all over.

What force on Earth made them think they were entitled to her body? Just what had taken the place of their brains that they would behave in such a way? Hermione had heard other girls around the school talk about this before, about their experiences where "no" meant nothing to their attackers. She remembered the looks on their faces, their hushed, pained voices, the anger lying beneath. She had never experienced it before until now, and she joined in that anger fully.

For once, the aroma of the old books surrounding her could not comfort her. The lovely, soothing colored light weakly streaming in from the window only bothered her. When she fell asleep she didn't know, but one moment she had been conscious and the next she had slipped down into nothingness, her thoughts and emotions blurring into one large, dark dangerous cloud in her dream, far off in the murky horizon, but she knew it was coming closer. She could feel the menacing presence it beheld and knew it was coming straight for her.

Draco strode through the empty corridors, his anger seeping into his veins, his lungs, his bones. All at once he wanted to go find Longbottom and rip him apart, limb by limb, and Potter too, but first he needed to find Granger. He hissed the password to their dorm and burst

through the door, glancing around to find the girl. Nothing. Unlocked her door with a flick of his wand and stepped through, not caring about the amount of noise he was making, and it didn't matter anyway because she wasn't there either.

Mind racing angrily, he strode back to the common room.

Where is she?

He closed his eyes and thought hard as to where she might be. She'd left Potter and Weasley, according to Blaises' report she had not wanted to see them before she'd left.

She must be hiding from them, then, he thought. That ruled out the Gryffindor Common Room, which was good because he never would have been able to get in. He rifled through his mind, wondering where she could have run off to when it hit him. The one place she always was; like a second home to her.

The library.

He set off at a brisk pace, almost running.

The library was closed but that didn't stop him. Surely it wouldn't have deterred Granger, either. He expected a series of complicated spells to stop him from entering but there was nothing. A silent 'Alohamora' opened the door and he was inside, shutting the doors behind him with a click. For extra measure, he added a Silencio at the entrance so no noise could escape the cavernous room.

Though he couldn't quite recall the exact location, his legs seemed to have a perfect memory, taking long strides to the area he distantly remembered.

The cloud was coming closer and closer in her dream; thunderclaps rang out like loud, demanding footsteps. It scared her. In her dream, the faster she ran, the cloud continued to follow her. How absurd, to fear and run from something so normal and harmless, but this was no normal cloud and its malevolence reached out to her, licking at her back and the soles of her feet regardless of how far she thought she got away from it.

There she was at last.

Cuddled into the window seat, her back to him. Her curls were spread over her like a thick blanket, the shimmery hairpins sliding out of her hair and onto the floor with soft plinks. In all her haste, she'd bunched up the skirt of her dress around her thighs so she could walk faster. Her white legs stretched out, intertwined on the dark cushion, and her arms lay folded over her face, shielding her eyes.

She was shivering hard, her shoulders and legs shaking. He thought he heard a whimper.

"Granger," he barked, and she jumped, jerking awake from her nap.

Confused, blinking her eyes rapidly, Hermione looked around and went pale when she saw who had woken her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Fear rose up in her chest at the look on his face. “What do you want?”

“What happened between you and Longbottom?” he asked, looking at her with such intensity she felt naked again, stripped under his stare.

Why was he here? Why was he asking her that? How had he remembered this place? She cursed herself for ever having brought him here.

“Nothing,” she whispered. She hated how weak she sounded. Clearing her throat, she added, “And it’s none of your business, too, so clear off.”

She rose, brushing her skirt back down over her legs. She straightened and noted with dismay he was blocking the exit.

“Don’t lie to me,” he whispered. “You were seen cavorting with Longbottom behind one of the trees. Do you deny it?”

She stared up at him, incredulous.

“Why does it matter? This doesn’t concern you,” she asked angrily, losing her patience. She fingered her wand, waiting to strike.

Malfoy stepped closer, and she backed away, stepping behind the table.

“Let me out, Malfoy. Madam Pince is here, I’ll scream for help,” she warned, hoping he wouldn’t see through her lie.

But he did, because he stepped around the table, saying, “No she’s not, pet. She was dancing with the Headmaster when I left. It’s only you and I here. Now tell me why you left Potter to go with Longbottom.”

His voice was low, lower than she’d ever heard it. It sent a shock of ice down her body, and she rounded the table, stopping when he followed her.

“Neville was helping me.” She said, drawing out her wand. “Is that the answer you want? Now let me out or I’ll hex you to pieces.”

Malfoy grinned. “Helping you with what?”

She raised her chin, trying hard not to let him see her hands shaking. “I-I fell.”

His eyes narrowed. “Liar.”

He took several steps closer and foolishly, she took more steps back, until she was trapped against a bookshelf with nowhere to run. She cursed herself for not thinking straight, raising her wand to stop the blond wizard from coming any closer.

He looked at her wand, held by a shaking hand, unfazed.

“Do you really think that will stop me?”

Her breathing quickened; her lungs felt too small to hold the air she needed so desperately.

“Repulso!”

He blocked it with a Protego of his own, and while she was busy sending another curse at him, he ducked and dodged it, and moving so quickly she barely had time to register it, pinned her to the shelves.

“Immobulus!” She hissed, and that one just grazed his shoulder. “Confundo!”

That one hit him, but as he blinked hard and tried to shake off the dizziness and mental slowdown it caused, he managed to tighten his grip on her even more so that she couldn’t slip away, and she was trying her damndest to.

The effects of the jinx faded quickly, and she had worn herself out trying to escape his grip. Draco yanked her wand from her fist and she cried out in rage. Hermione felt him place his palms on her cheeks, felt him lean in. She pushed against him, snarling with fear and anger, a tiger trying to claw its way out of a net.

“No!” she cried, “Get off me!”

Draco frowned, concentrating. He’d been taught Legimency at an early age by one of the masters; Snape himself. The only way he would get answers out of her was to employ it. Closing his eyes, he emptied his mind and focused on hers, drawing her thoughts to himself. The witch gave a small cry when she realized what he was doing and struggled harder against him, but he didn’t move. He rifled through her memories of the events of the day in reverse, starting with her breaking into the library. Went back and sped up a bit, rewinding until he found her dancing with McLaggen. He watched what happened afterward, fury knotting in his stomach. Watched as Neville came in to help, heard their exchange of pleas, and felt her shame and anger.

Ending the spell brought him back to her and back into reality, restraining a furious Granger, who was yelling at him thickly through her tears. He saw her neck and could still see McLaggen’s tongue crawling all over it as he had done only an hour before. Jealousy and anger overtook him, and he crashed his lips onto hers and undid his belt quickly, fingers flying.

Hermione let out a frustrated scream into his mouth, pushing against his chest, trying to turn away. Like before he didn’t listen to a word she said, only kissed her more deeply. She tried leaning back so he would lose his balance but he only grabbed her and pulled her closer to him, his fingers digging painfully deep into her flesh until they met bone. She felt him wind a warm, leathery object around her wrists and she jerked away, commanding him to stop. He pulled away and tied his belt securely, trapping her wrists. She was leaning back into the bookshelf, gasping for breath and regarding him as if he were insane.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed, her eyes large and disbelieving. How many times had she asked him already? Why did he never answer? “Have you gone mad?”

“I’d be the last to know if I had, so I don’t think I can give you a satisfactory answer on that. And I told you earlier. I thought I’ve made it obvious I want you.”

At hearing his confession she froze, and then let out a harsh, quick laugh of disbelief. “Surely you’re drunk. Untie me right now and give me my wand. I’m tired of this.”

The command was ignored—he grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the window seat, forcing her down onto it. Hermione was so stunned she didn't have time to react as he straddled her, holding her tied wrists above her head.

"I assure you I'm not drunk." He pressed a kiss to her neck and her lips parted in shock.

"You've always hated me," she said weakly, trying to make sense of what was happening. Her body was freezing up in fear.

"I have, and I do," he agreed. "That's how it started, I think. Believe me, I didn't set out wanting this to happen. It's your fault as much as mine. You've taken over me," he admitted hoarsely. "I don't know how you did it, little bird, but I only want to return the favor." She shuddered in revulsion.

Hermione's mind was reeling. She tugged her wrists, trying to slip them out of his belt. It was pulled so tight her hands were starting to lose feeling.

"I haven't done anything to you so I don't know what you're talking about. Now let me go. Please." She frowned, shivering when he chuckled and licked the shell of her ear.

"No doing, pet. Why would I let my little bird go when I've only just caught her? You belong to me."

He watched as her face drained of color and she stared up at him, her lovely eyes wide with shock and rage.

"You don't own me, you waste of magic. I belong to no one but myself." She gave a small shriek as he nipped her bottom lip, drawing a bead of blood.

"No—Malfoy, this isn't funny anymore. Let me go or I'll scream." Her words only seemed to energize him, he buried his head in her hair and inhaled, running his hand down her curves possessively.

"No one will hear you," he whispered, and her blood ran cold.

Malfoy pulled back and grinned at her, a genuine, wicked smile that showed teeth. It was the first time she'd ever seen him smile like that, and it terrified her.

"Get it into that thick skull of yours. You are mine, Granger. You bear my mark." That last sentence confused her, so he reached out and untied her wrists, only freeing her left arm. The second he'd freed it she flexed her arm and brought it quickly to the side as if to push him off, but he caught her wrist and roughly brought her arm closer to him. His other hand hovered over the crook of her elbow.

"What are you doing? What mark?" she asked, mild hysteria edging her voice.

"I marked you a while back, Granger. You just don't remember, but that's my doing." He placed his palm over her skin, muttering, "Finite Incantatem."

Slowly, her skin revealed a thin scar shaped like an ornate M. Horrified, Hermione sucked in a breath. "No. No. That's not possible. Where did this come from? *When did you do this?*" she recoiled in horror when he drew his wand and tapped it lightly on her forehead, restoring her memories of that awful night.

He watched as her eyes unfocused and she gasped at what was playing in her mind. When it was over her eyes refocused and she looked back at her scar in shock, tears in her eyes.

“M...” she whispered, lip quivering.

“M for Malfoy.” He stole a hard kiss from her lips.

“M for **mine**.” Reverently he ran his hand down the length of her thigh and hooked her leg around his waist roughly. She gasped and glared up at him, tears in her eyes. “Mudblood or not, you’re mine.”

“You disgusting bastard.”

He watched her stare at her scar in disgust. A tear slipped down her face. Her lips parted and her cheeks flushed, her eyes flashed back up to his.

She held out her hand. “Give me my wand. I don’t want any part of you on me. I never consented to any of this.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “No.”

She pushed her arm at him more aggressively. “*I don’t want this*. Get rid of it or I’ll make you pay, Malfoy, I swear it.” Tears quivered in her eyes, her lips began to tremble when he leered at her.

“It’s a reminder, Granger. So next time you flirt with Potter or anyone else you’ll remember who you belong to. You’ll always have a reminder of where your place is, and that’s with me.”

She shook her head and tried yanking her arm out of his grasp, crying out in pain as he held it tighter and then leaned down to suck at her neck.

“No! Get off me!”

In response, he lowered himself onto her body and pushed his hips against hers, and she cringed at feeling his erection grind against her. Malfoy groaned and retied her arm with the other, magically fastening them to the wall. She continued to struggle and protest. Her panicked words filled the air around them, piercing both their ears, but none reached outside. He silenced her with a jab of his wand.

As he ran his large hands down to her chest, which was heaving with panicked breaths he felt her frantic heartbeat. Her skin was so soft and smooth, the tops of her breasts rose and fell with each breath, enticing him to cup them with his hands through her dress, to lean forward and kiss that bare skin, mark her with his tongue. Her cries were silenced due to the spell, tears leaked from her brown eyes. When he raised his eyes to hers she shook her head quickly, raising her brows in a silent plea.

“Don’t worry, ma petite oiseau, I won’t take you yet. This is hardly the proper place. But —” he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small green box, “I do have a little gift for you.”

Her eyes told him exactly what he should do with his gift.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’ll like it, I’m sure.” He lifted something small and delicate out of the box and held the item in his hands, shielding it from her view.

Moving quickly, he reached up and untied both of her hands, bringing them down into her lap. She grimaced at her stiff muscles and flexed her hands. The second he let go of one of her arms to pick the mysterious object from his hand she brought her palm to his face with a silent roar.

Before the blow could land he had caught her wrist as easily as if it were a Snitch. Thwarted in her revenge, the witch glared at him and tried to push him away with her other arm even though it was still in his grip. Malfoy held her arms tighter, cutting off the circulation to her hands.

“Stop fighting me, Granger. There’s no use for it.” He slid the small object onto her ring finger of her left hand. Realizing what it was, she tried to jerk her hand away, but it was too late.

The ring was large and antique, and breathtakingly beautiful. A large green emerald sat in the middle of a cluster of small diamonds set in a thin platinum band, catching the little amount of light there was coming from the window and reflecting it onto her hand.

The look she gave it was one of pure contempt. It was clear she didn’t like it. He had known it was a bit much for her tastes, but thanks to time restraints it wasn’t like he’d had time to visit the jewelry shops anyway. That would have raised suspicions, for one, and he was sure it was fate’s doing that he had found the ring, and he was not one to ignore things like that. She met his eyes and mouthed, “What is the meaning of this?”

He traced his finger lightly over the ring and flipping over her hand, traced the veins in her palm. She closed her hand into a tight little fist and he let her, going back to the ring.

“The meaning of this ring is that you are mine, Hermione,” he said in a cold, controlled voice. She started and stared at his nonchalant use of her first name. “The Room of Requirement is such an interesting, helpful place. I found so many ancient, helpful books there. I found a few spells I put on that ring for... protection. You may not have any intimate or sexual contact with any man other than myself or anyone I have granted permission to touch you.”

He noticed how her skin drained of all color at this, and cupping her cheek, said, “You misunderstand me. I won’t be sharing you with anyone else. I don’t take kindly to sharing. What’s mine is mine.”

She tried to bite his hand. He held her down by the throat. Terrified, she struggled anew, but he squeezed hard, and she froze. He released pressure slowly.

“If you try and have relations with somebody else you won’t find it so easy, and I will know. With this ring, I’ll know your exact location and who you’re with.”

Outraged, she shook her head, her lips spewing silent expletives. That furious spark in her eye, that bend in her brows, that curl of her lip... enchanting.

“Listen carefully, Granger. You may not tell anyone what has happened here or anything else I’ve told you or done to you today or since the start of term. You may not speak of it,

write of it, or use any other means of communication to try to tell someone about this. I'll know if you try. Understand?"

He lifted the Silencio and immediately she spat on his cheek.

"How dare you think you can control me? You have no say at all over what I do! I don't want this, any of it. I am not yours to own." She moved to yank the ring off her finger but he stopped her, a curious smile on his lips.

Wiping the spittle off his skin, he said calmly, "Another thing I forgot to mention. Only I may take the ring off." He could see the gears turning in her head, could see her eyes flitting up to the books around them. "There's no other way, little bird."

She didn't listen, grasping the ring in her finger and desperately attempting to pull it off. It didn't budge. She looked up at him then, her eyes both pleading and furious.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

Carefully, he stroked her cheek, looking into her eyes. At that proximity, he could see all the fine detail in her eyes. Crystalline tears hung wet on the tips of her lashes, ready to drop at any second. Her pupils had shrunk.

"You're the only girl in the bloody school who has brains enough to compete with me for best in our year."

"Don't twist it," she cut in angrily, "all these years it was *you* who could hardly catch up, even now. You don't deserve this position and you know it!"

"The fact of the matter is that the position is mine, and if I truly didn't deserve it, it would have been taken from me months ago."

She opened her mouth for a vicious rebuttal but he covered it with his palm.

"You're unlike anyone I've ever known. No other is as intelligent, nor fierce as you. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on. Have you ever read any of those fairytale books as a child?" he didn't wait for her to answer. 'The dragons always hoard gold and jewels, treasures and princesses. Well, pet, you're my princess,' he leaned in closer still, brushing his lips against hers as he spoke. She frowned and shut her eyes, turning her head. Still trapped in his grip, her hands curled into fists. "My parents would have me marry some Pureblood girl I barely know or don't like. Why bother, when I've got the best witch in this whole damned school in my grasp?"

His hands cupped her breasts again, squeezing firmly. She gave a clipped gasp and tried to shove his hands off of herself.

"Don't!"

"You're so innocent," he whispered huskily, trailing his hand up her neck to cup her jaw. He kissed her again, softly this time. "Worth more than any treasure."

Her mind couldn't grasp what was happening. This was too much. First the awful dance, then Cormac, now Malfoy again? His words were barely registering in her mind anymore. After the ring had been forced onto her finger she'd felt herself slipping into shock. After everything that had happened tonight, she was almost at her wit's end.

She needed out. She couldn't handle this, not now. Escape came first. She would find a place to hide and then process this later.

Draco couldn't take it anymore and kissed her hard, ravaging her lips with his own. She stilled beneath him, not reacting.

He forced his tongue into her mouth again, and she forced down the bile that rose up to her throat. She needed to get away—*now*. His erection was pressed against her lower body, hard and unforgiving, making her skin crawl. He grabbed her arms and restrained them again over her head, he slid his arms to her body and ran them down along her stomach, gathering her skirt to push it out of the way. Hermione fought him in this, but eventually, he had got it all out of the way and had bared her legs.

"So lovely," he whispered, his hands on her hips, exploring her soft skin, the heat between her thighs. He touched her through her underwear, and Hermione jerked in fear, her face drained of color.

"Do-!" He covered her mouth with his palm, his other hand still touching her between her legs. Hermione squirmed, trying to avoid his probing touch, humiliated tears swimming in her eyes.

His breathing was uneven as he pulled back up to kiss her. He buried his head in her breasts, one hand still at her lower body, the other focused in exposing her breasts, pulling down at her neckline.

"NO!" she screamed, managing to free one hand from its restraint. The other followed immediately after, and using all her strength she pushed him off her as hard as she could. He went sprawling to the floor. Hermione scrambled off the window seat, heart racing, looking for her wand. She was searching as quickly as she could, but he was getting back up, snarling and she saw her wand in his pocket.

"Give me my wand," she hissed wildly, reaching for it.

He tucked it into his jacket.

"I didn't want this, either."

Perplexed, caught in surprise by his words, she stopped. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted so much to keep hating you as I did before. The first time I kissed you it meant hardly anything, it was nothing more than a morbid impulse." He advanced slowly, forcing her to continue edging backward, feeling her path with her hands.

She couldn't look away from his eyes. All this had to be a dream, it was so absurd.

"By the second kiss you'd already infected me," he said bitterly.

"Infected?"

"I don't mind as much, now." He gave her a grim smile. "I should have known this years ago, but I suppose in my prejudice I've been willfully blind."

Her expression was of utter disbelief. "You've been ignorant as well as blind if you still don't understand that my feelings are the exact opposite of yours!"

“Oh, I understand completely,” he said.

“Then *why* ignore it?”

“Because it doesn’t suit me.”

Hermione’s blood ran cold.

A sob welled up in her throat—she stifled it and ran, not bothering to pick up her skirt in her haste. The fabric flowed behind her and he grabbed for it, barely grasping the material before it slipped out of his reach.

What had gone wrong, and how? Had this really been her fault, as he’d said? She tried to think of how she might have caused this and failed. She had never asked him to kiss her or do any of this. He’d always been arrogant and demanding, but as bad as his behavior was before, he’d never shown the level of absolute lunacy he was showing now. Had he been hiding this part of himself all this time? Or had his self proclaimed obsession warped his mind?

One thing was certain: she had to get help. The biggest mistake she had ever made was not reporting him directly after the first assault. It was time to rectify that before it was too late. To hell with her plan. She would find McGonagall and tell her everything tonight.

It already is too late, a voice whispered to her. *You’re wearing his ring. He said it will prevent you from telling anyone.*

Hermione could only hope he had said that as a means to frighten her into silence.

The exit was drawing near. Hermione went for it as fast as she could.

Hot on her trail, Draco swore, looking around. He had been so close and then she’d gone and ducked somewhere and he’d lost her. He strained his ears and listened close.

He could hear her bare feet against the old wood flooring, scurrying father away. He followed the sounds immediately.

She was trying to breathe as quietly as possible, only that was exceptionally hard because of how frightened she was.

Stop being such a bloody coward. Are you a Gryffindor or not? A shrewd voice in the back of her mind asked.

She ignored it. She had every right to be scared right now. Everything she’d gone through the whole day was crashing down on her, and she felt sick. She had to get out of there.

Moving as quickly as a snitch she silently made her way through the maze of books, pausing every now and then when she would hear a strange sound somewhere behind her.

It’s probably a mouse, and nothing else, she said to herself. If it were Malfoy the sound would have been louder. She sharpened her gaze and looked around carefully. *Where did he go?*

She hoped to the Gods he'd gone already.

There they were, the doors that would lead to her safety. Hermione had no clue how much time had passed since she'd come here. Perhaps the ball was over by now and the students would be out in the corridors, heading back to their dormitories. If that was the case, then she would be safe.

She ran the last few feet to the doors, almost tripping over her gown in her haste.

She turned the doorknob but the door didn't open. She tried the other.

"Alohamora!" she whispered, and to her immense relief, they opened just a fraction. She began to push them open faster and got a peek of the corridor—empty.

Footsteps behind her. She heard his furious voice say something quickly. The doors slammed in her face.

No no no no!

She jumped when he grabbed her by the hips and turned her around to face him. She raised her bent arm to strike him in the face with her elbow. He dodged it and restrained her arm. Hermione struggled to be let free.

"Having trouble, love?" he whispered.

"Give me my wand, Malfoy, and let me out. And take this bloody ring off me this instant," she snarled.

"As you wish, Granger. But you're keeping the ring. It's rude to give back a gift, you know."

He unlocked the door and she stepped out quickly, looking around her once. There was still nobody around. She held out her hand for her wand.

"No goodnight kiss?" he asked, pretending to be upset.

Hermione struck at his chest, trying to keep her voice from wavering. "No. *Never*. You're a monster, Malfoy. I hope you rot in Azkaban once you're expelled. I'll make sure of it!"

Draco laughed and pressed her wand into her palm. His voice turned threatening. "If you tell anyone what happened tonight you'll be sorry."

Without waiting for her reply he walked off. Seizing her chance, Hermione turned her wand on him and prepared to utter a curse.

"There's no use trying to hex me or anything, Granger. The ring prevents that as well." Hermione didn't believe him, but when her Stupefy glanced off his back she took a step back in shock, and then sent another, and produced the same result. By that time she was livid and about ready to run after him and demand to know what he'd done when he turned and gave her a wink. Clutching her wand, Hermione instantly decided against it.

He wanted me to follow.

"Goodnight, little bird," his voice echoed back to her, and by the time she looked up, he had gone.

Suddenly alone in the dark corridor, Hermione wanted to disappear. Her skin still crawled with the ghost of Malfoy's touches. She wanted the floor to swallow her and take her somewhere else. Luckily the Christmas holiday started tomorrow, and she would be going to the Burrow with Harry and Ron.

Thinking fast, she hurried downstairs and tried to find McGonagall. There were a few students leaving early, talking amongst each other. They didn't even notice her as she entered the otherwise empty corridor. She took a peek inside the Great Hall and located McGonagall at the far end, speaking to Dumbledore and Hagrid by a Christmas tree. She debated going in and asking to speak to her in private but looked down at herself, saw her now-wrinkled dress, her disheveled hair, felt the dried tears on her face and the tenderness of her lips.

She looked like she had been attacked. The thought made her stomach drop.

I was attacked.

Again she felt the sudden urge to clean herself, as if that would clean her memories, too. The M on her arm was still visible now that Malfoy had taken the concealment charm off. She felt violated, to think he had done that to her and made sure she hadn't known until he wanted her to. The thought made her want to vomit—what else had he done that she didn't know about?

An idea struck. She ducked into an alcove and cast a Disillusionment charm over herself to stay mostly invisible and hidden. She didn't know where Draco had gone after he had left her outside the library. Suppose he was still in the corridors now? Or in their dorm? Either way, she would have to be stealthy.

She made it to the dorm and into her room undisturbed, her heart pounding all the way there. She shut her door and locked it, tore through her schoolbag and found her quill and spare parchment, and not wanting to leave the safety of her room and go out into the common room to sit at the worktable, she inked her quill and addressed the note to Professor McGonagall.

So far so good. Her hands were shaking so her writing wasn't neat as it usually was, but that didn't matter. Malfoy's words danced around in her head. She tried to doubt them.

She tried to write, 'Draco Malfoy has assaulted me.'

She got as far as his name, and then her hand refused to keep going. Her insides twisted. She tried again.

Again, she got as far as 'Draco Malfoy' before her hand froze again. She shook her head, tried different variations, tried writing the words inside circles and drawing arrows to guide the reader into reading them in the right order, tried a different language, even, but it all led to the same result.

She flung her quill angrily to the other side of her room, and in the process knocked over her inkwell. Ink spilled over the floor, a small black lake forming by her foot.

Hermione held her face in her hands, willing herself not to cry, and tried to say it out loud.

"Draco Malfoy—"

Now her tongue locked up and refused to form the next words.

“He—”

He assaulted me. He kissed me against my will. He threatened me.

“Malfoy—”

She gave up, panting, a headache forming at her right temple.

He’d told the truth, then. She had thought it was a lie to frighten her.

Despair filled her again. What would she do about the ring? There was no way in hell she could go around anywhere with it on. It would draw attention, and even worse, it would allow Malfoy to think he’d won. She had to get Malfoy to take it off, but when? They left for the Burrow the next morning so she’d have to do it tonight.

The prospect of sneaking into his chambers was terrifying, but she took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, calming her mind. Who was Malfoy to think she was nothing better than a possession? Who was he to claim her as his without her consent? An unexpected shudder ran through her, and goosebumps rose up on her skin. She fingered her wand, stood up and vanished the ink spill from the floor.

He had not won. He should not have told her about the spells on the ring. She would take it off as soon as she could, and destroy it, and flee the common room before he woke up and realized what she had done. She wasn’t going without a fight.

12. Revelation

I don't own anything related to Harry Potter.

Shadows loomed along the walls, shrouding the room in a veil of uncertainty. Some time ago the fire had been extinguished and so an unnatural chill permeated the atmosphere. Hermione was glad she had changed into warmer clothing. To muffle her footsteps she'd worn her thickest pair of socks. After making a stealthy and exhausted return to the common room, Hermione had showered, dressed, and then waited and waited in her room all night for Malfoy to return. She had locked her door and turned off her light and sat up on her bed, tense, revisiting the memory of what had happened earlier, pulling on that blasted ring that wouldn't come off her finger, her ears straining to hear for when he came in. *If* he came in.

Time had passed slowly. It was late, so very late, and her eyelids were heavy and her limbs ached—she wanted to lie down and sleep and forget the whole day, but couldn't. The ring still pulsed faintly on her finger, a constant reminder of what she had to do, what she had been through.

She had jerked awake to the sound of footsteps in the common room—quiet and deliberately slow, as if he was also tired, or trying to make as little noise as possible. The fire came on in the common room, its light bright under her door. She stayed frozen on her bed, heart racing, listening keenly as he moved around, taking his shoes and coat off. From there on, his footsteps had become almost silent. She waited to hear the sound of his door closing, debating whether she should creep to her door to listen better but decided against it, afraid she would make too much noise and give herself away.

Instead, to her horror, she saw movement at the sliver under her door and saw the shadowy form of legs on the other side. She had grasped her wand in one trembling hand, turning pale when she heard the almost imperceptible creak of the doorknob being tried one way, then the other. She wasn't in the habit of locking her door but had done it on impulse that night, and was extremely grateful she had—after tonight, there was no telling what might have happened had he come in. She waited, hardly daring to breathe, wondering if he would use magic to unlock her door, but his shadow lingered there a few seconds longer, and finally, moved away. Hermione had let out a silent, shaky breath, her hand still tight around her wand. Seconds later, she heard his door close quietly.

She had continued to wait after that. He might still be awake, after all. She had no notion of his sleeping habits. Some people fell asleep quickly. Some people took hours to fall asleep. She waited and hoped he was the former type of sleeper, and a heavy one at that. It would make things easier. If not, she would use a spell to keep him from waking while she was there.

At two in the morning, when she had run out of excuses as to why she couldn't wait another hour, she forced herself to act. Hermione slipped out of her bed and out her door, whispered across the common room and lingered at the frame of Malfoy's door, patting her

pocket to make sure she had what she needed. The fire in the common room had started up again but she put it out with her wand quickly.

She would not test to see if the door was locked. That might create noise as he had done, and if he was awake or a light sleeper, it might give her away. She whispered an *Alohamora* and opened the door with magic, easing it open slowly after casting a *Silencio* on the hinges and doorknob for good measure.

Hermione stopped the door at three inches open and listened intently. All she could hear was the soft crackling of the fire and deep breathing. She hesitated and took a peek in the gap. The weak moonbeams coming in from the windows on the wall opposite her softly lit her tense, frightened face. She could see him topless and half-covered in his sheets, turned away from her, the sharp angles of his broad back and shoulders forming a stark silhouette against the faint light of the moon. Hermione fervently hoped he was not nude underneath his bedding. She waited, trying to summon the courage to enter his room.

She tried pulling at the ring one more time. Nothing happened, and that was motivation enough—thinking he could control her in such a barbaric manner was an enormous mistake on his part. She would not let him lay such an absurd claim on her, as if she had no voice of her own and was just an object to be reserved, and *marked*, too, like he wanted to ward others away from her.

Hermione looked at her new scar, her jaw clenching tight.

No one controls me.

She crouched on entering and approached his bed slowly, fighting the urge to shudder. He slept on. It annoyed her to no end to see him so calm and relaxed after what he had put her through but didn't know what she had expected, considering his constant unapologetic and ruthless behavior. Of course he would sleep peacefully. He had gotten what he wanted.

No, you haven't.

She grasped her wand, unsure of how to proceed.

He shifted, taking in a deep breath, and settled down again. Hermione retreated quickly into the shadows in alarm, but he was still deeply asleep.

She thought of that taunting wink he'd sent her earlier after what had happened in the library. He had known she would have been furious enough to chase him down and retaliate. It was possible he would have expected her to come in to get the ring off and was simply waiting for the right moment to strike again.

Hermione took three steps back at once, watching him warily, waiting for him to move. Malfoy slept on—for once, totally oblivious to her presence. On impulse she glanced around the room quickly, looking for his wand. It wasn't on the night table, nor anywhere else she could see. What if he did know she was there? Merlin, she should have planned this better. It was too late for that, now. Hermione raised her wand and summoned his wand as quietly as she could, watching it float to her from his bag on the floor by the bed. Holding it was a great relief, but she was painfully aware by now that Malfoy was proficient at both wandless *and* nonverbal magic. When had he ever had the time to learn, and who had taught him? None of their peers knew how. Not even *she* had tried it enough, and the one time she had managed it

had been quite the accident. She tucked his wand into her pocket anyway and whispered a spell to put him into a deeper sleep, letting her stiff shoulders drop as he let out a cool gust of air from between his lips and his head sank deeper into his pillow.

Relieved, she wiped her sweaty palms onto her jumper.

Switching her wand to her left hand, she took another tentative step forward, careful that the floorboards would not groan under her weight, but they thankfully remained solid and silent. So far so good, but now came the hard part. Now she had to touch him.

Crouching again, she made her way to the side of his bed and gently eased his hand up off his chest, making sure she wasn't touching any more of him than she had to. With shaking fingers she brought his arm up and wrapped his fingers around the platinum band on her finger. A twist and a hard pull next, and to her absolute joy the ring slid right off, but that joy morphed into horror in an instant when his hand twisted and gripped her wrist tightly. Her other hand dashed into her pocket. Something fell out of it and rolled along the floor. His eyes were open, mercurial and gleaming in the moonlight. She almost screamed.

"Expelliarmus."

Her wand was yanked out of her hand and the other flew out of her pocket, landing somewhere in the dark room with loud clatters. His other hand shot out and took her other wrist, and this time Hermione did scream as he flexed his arms and pulled her into his bed with him. When she opened her mouth to summon her wand back she found he had Silenced her and lay there, stiff and stunned, her heart pounding at a rate speeding toward immolation as his arms began to wrap around her body, holding her against him, her back to his front, one arm barring across her lower body, pushing it into his groin. She had never seen him without all his layers on and felt he was more fit than she had thought—his body was hard and muscled. She struck and pushed at him in trying to free herself. She heard him grunt as she drove her elbow into his sternum, and in the next instant, her arms were bound together at the wrists and elbows. She felt his erection pressing against her and tried to shift so as to not touch it, trying to bite at the hand he had pressed over her mouth. She was breathing frantically, the sound of her own rushed breaths was the only thing she could hear. Hermione paused her struggle, panting, and realized he was too strong to fight off wandless, and realized to her dismay that yes, he was, in fact, nude under his sheets. In moving so much she had only succeeded in wearing herself out.

When her breaths had slowed down he finally spoke, his voice a velvet crawl in her ears. A hand stroked her hair. She flinched.

"Did you think I wouldn't expect you to pull something like this, Granger? Do you take me for a fool?"

She could say nothing. How could she have been so stupid? She had essentially walked into a trap.

I had to try...

Malfoy reached to cup her neck. She went still. His thumb idly stroked the lobe of her ear.

"You tried to keep me asleep, you clever little thing. Almost as if you knew... Did you wonder why it didn't work? I had a shield over myself. I knew you'd come. I didn't have to

have my eyes open. I could *smell* you the moment you came in.” He buried his face into her hair and inhaled.

“Regardless of why you’re here, it’s nice to have the night time visits reciprocated.” Hermione frowned in confusion. He pressed his hips into her, his penis rubbing against her bottom. She squeezed her eyes shut. Only his sheets prevented true contact between them. She shuddered and shook her head.

He chuckled. She felt it rumble in his chest.

“You had valid concerns about the ring. I was in such a rush to get it on you I didn’t realize the timing was off.”

Did that mean he would take it back? She dared to hope.

“I can’t have you going off to Weasley’s hovel with all your friends with my ring on your finger, can I? It’s not exactly inconspicuous. I’m sure they’d all plot to take it from you and sell it.”

She tried to elbow him again, but couldn’t. He laughed and pushed his hips against her, a soft groan filling her ears. The heat coming from his body was making her perspire. His hand tightened around her throat and she froze.

“Fight me as much as you want,” he said, his voice almost hoarse. “I love it. Of course, you’ll still wear the ring eventually, so don’t go thinking I’ve changed my mind.”

He took his hand from her throat and held her by the waist, pulled his sheet off himself and humped her slowly, his penis rubbing between the cheeks of her bum. Hermione cringed and shut her eyes, her face in flames. He moaned.

“If you think this is so bad why don’t I try it with your clothes off to see how that compares?” He asked, and she twisted her neck as best as she could to give him a pleading glance to reconsider.

“Just as I thought.” He bent his neck to kiss her shoulder. “Push your arse against me.”

When she refused to do so he did it himself, locking her hips in place with his arm to increase the contact and continued to grind, turning rougher as his release neared. She was crying now. His breathing filled her ears.

He moaned as he came, jerking his hips against her bottom. Hermione could feel the back of her shirt grow wet and hot and tried to move away again to no avail. As he ejaculated, he bit down gently on the slope of her neck and she flinched again, raising her shoulders defensively.

“Perfect,” he murmured.

Hermione tried to shift away from him and he let her, removing his hands from her to vanish his semen from her clothes and to push his hair from his face.

“Where’s the ring?” He asked. “Is it on the floor?”

She had managed to sit upright at the corner of the bed, staring blankly at the window, her arms wrapped around herself. He called her and she looked at him over her shoulder, furious

and wounded.

“Is it on the floor?” He repeated. She nodded, still glaring.

“Good. I’ll have you wearing it again once we’re back. In the meantime, I still can’t have you telling anyone about this.”

He summoned his wand and pointed it at her. Her eyes widened and she tried to get off the bed and out of the way.

“Imperio.”

Draco watched as her body language and expression relaxed.

“You will not tell, allude to, or show anyone what’s happened between us since the start of term. You will not ask for help and will behave as if everything is normal while you are away. You will not attack me. You will *not* have sex with Potter, or anyone else. Do you understand?”

She opened her mouth but no sound came out. Draco undid the Silencio at last.

“I understand.”

“Good. You also will not be aware you’re under an Imperius. I want you to follow my orders but act naturally the second you leave this room.”

“I will,” she said tonelessly.

He got up and went to her, cupped her face in his hands to kiss her, summoned her wand from the floor and pressed it into her hand. She remained still—compliant, awaiting another order.

“Go, and rest if you can,” he said. “I’ll see you when you come back.”

Hermione staggered the moment his door closed behind her, her face ashen, her skin burning where he had touched her. Clutching her wand, she rushed into her room as best as she could, slammed her door and locked it. She barely made it to the bathroom in time to vomit. When she was done she coughed and flushed it down, her hands tearing her pajamas off. He had cleaned his mess off but the act had stained more than just her clothes. Hermione set them aflame, sealing the smoke into a bubble that she sent out her window to dissipate when it was done. She stood there, shaking in the cold bathroom, her thoughts running wild with emotion—she had never felt more violated. She had already showered after she had returned to the common room earlier but she needed another one now. A scalding one.

Once done, she dressed quickly, throwing on the first things she found in her trunk. Her hands were oddly steady. Her hair still dripped so she dried it with magic and returned her towel to the bathroom, remembered the ashes of her clothes still lying there. Something glittered at the bottom of the pile. She had almost forgotten. Hermione pulled the ring out of the ashes and tucked it into her pocket. She had hoped it would be damaged in some way but it seemed in perfect condition. Well, she would try again later.

After all this, what had amounted to probably the worst day of her life, some good had come out of it. In those hours waiting in her room, Hermione had inspected the ring closely. It had rejected all the alterations or spell-blockers she had tried on it in her attempts to take it off and seemed to pulse weirdly on her finger and not because it was tight and restricting blood flow. What magic had Malfoy put on it?

There would be time to dwell on it later and inspect it some more. She had got it off and had come away from that traumatizing encounter with the true ring. As she'd poked and prodded at it in those hours, she'd had a strong impulse to make a duplicate of it and stow it in her pocket, just in case something went wrong in Malfoy's quarters. She shivered, trying not to think about how wrong they'd gone.

But not entirely.

He'd gone right back to sleep and she had left the room in a fog, leaving him with the fake, which she had barely managed to switch out before he had caught her.

It was almost five in the morning. She didn't know whether Malfoy was leaving for holiday on the Hogwarts Express too or staying in the castle, but she had a limited amount of time before he found out she had tricked him. When he found out, he would hunt her down. She intended to be far away by then and would make sure to destroy the ring before she came back. He had been clever to shield himself like that to lay in wait for her, but she had been clever, too.

She wiped at her eye. Not clever enough to escape what had happened, but enough to make sure the threat of the ring was in *her* power, not his.

More tears threatened to spill.

Now isn't the time to cry. I have to get away.

Everyone would be at breakfast soon. The train would be arriving at six and leaving at seven-thirty. Her trunk was already packed and waiting. Hermione shrank it and tucked it into her pocket, shivering when her fingers brushed against the ring. She moved silently out of the common room, even while knowing he was really asleep this time, and satisfied enough that he would not bother her now. She couldn't even look at his door. Hermione fastened her cloak around herself, and ghosted out of the Head Common Room.

"The train's leaving soon, what d'you reckon's keeping her?" Ron asked, looking worriedly around the platform

Harry was also craning his neck this way and that, his bespectacled green eyes roving through the crowd of departing students for Hermione. Ginny and Lavender waited nearby, speaking with Luna, who seemed to be the only one who wasn't worried. Pale hair fluttering in the winter winds, she looked calmly at Neville, who held her hand. Neville looked down at her, mustering a small smile from underneath his thick hat. The intense worry didn't leave his eyes, though. He was the only one out of them all who knew what had happened to Hermione the previous night, and he hoped she was ok. It wasn't until after he had finished fetching McGonagall the night before that he realized he shouldn't have left Hermione to go alone.

What if something else might have happened? Guilt pricked at him and he squeezed Luna's hand more tightly, his eyes scanning the crowd around them.

Snowflakes began to fall in fat, heavy clumps, and at the warning whistle from the steam locomotive, they all realized they could not stand there for much longer or it would leave without them.

Ron sighed and clapped Harry on the back. "Don't worry mate, even if she misses the train, you know McGonagall will help her get to the Burrow."

Harry nodded. "You lot go ahead. I'll keep waiting."

They boarded the train. Harry stayed on the platform, watching the last of the students filter into the train, anxiety needling at him. His scar itched.

"Hi," came a voice from behind him, and he whirled around to find Hermione.

She appeared exhausted, faint circles curving under her eyes, her lips held in a small frown, and her eyes were anxious and scared but most of all apologetic. Hair secured under her knit cap, the winds danced harshly on her skin, rousing redness in her nose and cheeks.

"Hi."

He rushed forward and enveloped her in his arms. Hermione relaxed, inwardly cursing the tears that had sprung up behind her eyelids. He pulled back and studied her face anxiously.

"Are you all right? What happened last night? We—I was so worried about you. We were waiting for you at breakfast."

She *had* intended to go meet them in the Great Hall and pull Harry aside to tell him there, but the closer she got to the Great Hall the more nerve she lost, and realized she didn't want to be in a loud, crowded room anyway, especially if there was a chance Malfoy would come in at any time. Instead, she'd gone to the kitchens and eaten alone.

She opened her mouth to answer, but at that moment another piercing train whistle sliced through the air and they jumped. She brushed a clump of snowflakes from her eye.

"I'll tell you once we're inside, but we need to be alone."

He nodded, confused. They boarded the train together.

They walked silently through the train cars, looking for an empty compartment. When they passed the one that held their friends, they waved but held up a finger to indicate they would come back in a matter of time. Hermione and Neville locked eyes. He knew what she was going to do, and nodded his head once in encouragement, but raised his brows as if asking silently if she would be okay. Hermione tried to give him a reassuring smile.

Eventually they finally found a compartment; all the way at the back of the train. Harry slid the door open and she entered, sitting by the window. He closed the door and approached her slowly. Something bad must have happened the night before. He couldn't reason why else she wanted secrecy and seemed so fragile. He didn't know whether to sit next to her or across from her. A second or two ticked by and he sat across from her, placing his hands on his knees. She looked up at him, embarrassed.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said gently, and hesitated. "Was it me?"

"No!" She said, surprised. "You had nothing to do with it. You were lovely last night."

He looked relieved.

"Then what is it?"

She was red, avoiding his eye.

"Cormac asked to dance with me while you were away," she said. "I didn't realize he was drunk."

"Drunk?"

"Seamus was sharing some liquor."

"Oh." Harry looked at her carefully. "Did he do something to you?"

Hermione sighed shakily.

"He pushed me behind one of the trees and kept trying to kiss me but I fought him off."

"Shit, are you okay?" Harry asked, his eyes full of concern.

She nodded. A lie. But what else could she say?

"Neville found us and helped me report him to McGonagall. He's been expelled."

"Good," Harry said, scowling. His features softened and he hesitated before moving from his seat to sit beside her.

"Why didn't you tell me after it happened? I was worried."

She put her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight I was so upset. I didn't know where you were and I asked Neville not to tell anyone because I was embarrassed and angry and I didn't want anyone to worry but that didn't work."

"I wish you would have told me earlier," he said. "But I'm glad you're okay. If I'd known what he would do, I wouldn't have left you alone."

Hermione peered at him from behind her hands.

"Don't you dare blame yourself for this, Harry," she said sharply. "Neither of us knew he was drunk or what was going to happen."

"Still." Harry rubbed at his face and sighed. "I can't believe he did that to you."

"According to his record, he's done it before, too," Hermione said. "Professor McGonagall was so angry, I felt she might have turned him to dust with just one look."

"Shame she didn't." Harry rubbed at his face. "I wish I could have been there to help."

"You can still help me by not letting the word get out. I don't want anyone else to know."

"Of course."

"I was so excited for the ball to be a lovely night," she said, her face turning red, tears gathering in her eyes. "As if the dance with Malfoy wasn't bad enough."

Harry let her lean on him and rubbed her arm. She sniffed, wished she could find the courage to tell him about Malfoy.

"He looked off, didn't he?" he asked. "Not exactly angry, but something else. What did he say to you?"

Hermione paused. The ring grew heavy in her pocket.

She opened her mouth to speak. An ominous, overpowering wave of dread washed over her. Hermione didn't realize it came from the ring.

'If you tell anyone, you'll be sorry.'

Would he know? What would he do if he found out?

"He... he was surprised I knew how to dance. He warned me not to embarrass him."

A tear escaped, then another. Hermione wiped them fast. She hated him.

"What a prick," Harry muttered comfortingly. "I thought you danced better than him, anyway. He looked too serious."

If only you knew, she thought. The dread intensified. She clutched her stomach. A thought hit her suddenly. She paled.

"Is he on the train?"

Harry thought for a moment, unaware that every second without answer was agony for her.

"No. I haven't seen him since yesterday, actually."

Hermione sighed in relief. "Thank Merlin."

"Was the dance that bad?"

"If I still had my Time Turner, I'd break my own leg just to avoid it."

"Merlin." Harry grinned. "Or just break his."

"Even better."

There was a brief pause.

"While we're talking about Malfoy," she said, looking down at her hands in her lap, "I don't quite know how to explain this."

He mutilated my arm. He's sexually assaulted me several times now, and won't let me fight back. He speaks as if I belong to him.

"Malfoy's been acting very strangely lately," she managed to say. "I think something's wrong with him."

Harry looked at her, his face patient, waiting for the rest of the story.

“We don’t talk much,” she said. A lie, but she couldn’t tell him what they did talk about anyway, so what was the point? If she could not tell Harry about Malfoy’s constant harassment, she could at least tell him about the behavior that had stirred suspicion within her for the past few months. “I get the sense he’s up to something. He’ll stay up all night and comes back to the dorm early in the morning. I’ve asked him why and he never answers. I might just be paranoid but I feel it could be something really bad.”

And I’m scared of him.

Not scared. Terrified. She had not wanted to admit that to herself, but it was the truth. She had found it easy to laugh at him when he was nothing more than a bigoted, schoolyard bully who leapt behind his cronies after instigating fights. It was harder to laugh now that he was stronger and more dangerous. The sexual nature of his harassment made it so much worse than when he had just sneered at her and called her a Mudblood. She remembered the perverse moaning he had done when he’d ejaculated onto her as she had been mute and bound. Not scared. She was properly terrified of him.

Harry processed her words. It had so happened, in fact, that on a few occasions he had found Malfoy lurking about after-hours while he had been doing the same, perusing the Marauder’s Map. Malfoy was always alone on those instances, and the hour was too late for it to be Head business. Harry hadn’t thought much of it, at the time. But now he wondered whether Malfoy might indeed have a plan. He was the right age to have been accepted into the Death Eaters. The thought sent a chill down his spine. Could he have been wearing the Mark all this time, and nobody suspecting?

Term was well underway by now, though, and so far there’d been no Malfoy-ish behavior like they were used to. He had apparently kept his head down all these months. That did seem odd since it was so unlike him. But without further investigation or evidence, what conclusions could be made?

“He might have a girlfriend he goes to visit.”

Hermione *wished*. Then he might leave her alone. But the implication of the grand ring in her pocket and his possessive behavior suggested she was the one Malfoy had forced into that role, whether she wanted it or not. It made her skin absolutely crawl. He certainly never entered her room, *especially* not at night—

Malfoy’s words from the night before cut across her thoughts.

‘Regardless of why you’re here, it’s nice to have the night time visits reciprocated.’

He had muted her and she had been too distracted afterward to ask for clarification.

The random bruises on her body, on areas a lover might grip too hard: her hips, her bum, a few times, on her breasts. She had chalked them all up to moving too much in her sleep, to being careless while moving about in the daytime. Waking up that night with a lapse in memory, or having the sense that she had been kissed or touched and waving it off as from an erotic dream.

Her stomach churned as if she might be ill. His allusions from almost a month ago, when he’d smugly told her about the witch he’d spent the night with. He had not provided detail

and she had not wanted any. Now she wondered what he might have said if she had, because she was certain that witch had been herself.

Oh, Gods.

Harry looked at her strangely, sensing there was something she was not telling him. She had gone very pale all of a sudden and looked like she might be sick. She had pulled her sleeves over her hands and seemed to withdraw into herself.

He was about to ask when a loud tapping at the door made them both jump.

Ron opened the door.

“Trolley’s here if you wanted anything. She’s running low on supply, so come quick.”

“Be right there,” Harry said.

Ron was peering curiously at Hermione.

“Are you alright?”

She stood abruptly. “Yes, I’m fine. And hungry. Shall we go, Harry?”

Harry stood, and they exited the compartment and headed down the narrow hall, cramped with other students wanting to visit the sweets trolley.

Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand and she turned, knowing he had sensed what she had felt back in their compartment. There was fear and unhappiness in her eyes though she tried to mask it. It hurt to see. He resolved he would get to the bottom of it.

“When we go back, we’ll keep an eye on him and try to figure out what he’s up to.”

She tried to smile and nodded.

“Oh, Harry! Hermione! How are you, my dears?” Mrs. Weasley launched herself at them, folding her arms around them in a warm embrace, fussing over Harry’s hair and taking Hermione’s hands in hers, beaming at the young witch.

“We’re well, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione replied. “How are you?”

Mrs. Weasley sighed. “As well as can be expected, dear. The twins have turned the house into a joke shop storehouse, with all the things they’ve got lying around. Percy, Charlie and Bill weren’t able to come, but they send their regards to everyone.”

At that moment, a loud crack sounded in the air and Fred and George appeared next to their mother, smiling wickedly.

“Hello, Harry, Hermione, Ron,” they chimed in unison.

Hermione laughed and hugged them both. Mrs. Weasley was gasping for breath and swatting them crossly with her wand.

“It’s wonderful to see you two again,” Hermione admitted. She had dearly missed their mischievousness around the school. Considering everything that had happened so far that

year, she could have used some of their silly antics to liven things up a bit at Hogwarts.

"Well, I swan. Misses us, she says! Never thought we'd hear that coming from you," Fred said, grinning widely. "Feel free to come down by our shop anytime, you hear? Special discounts for Head Girl!"

He winked. Hermione laughed, nodding, and moved on with Harry who was being ushered to the dinner table by Mrs. Weasley.

Ron and Ginny were engaged in a duel with fake wands they had found, jabbing at each other until the wands burst into silly shapes.

"Put those away, if you please!" snapped Molly, looking sternly at them over her shoulder by the stove. Flicking her wand, the bowls of soup flew over to the table, setting themselves down by each person. They all tucked in, famished from the train ride. Fred and George were sniggering into their bowls, and Hermione looked at Ron, who was looking strangely green.

Before she could ask what was wrong, Ron bolted from the table, clapping a hand to his mouth. The twins couldn't hold back any longer and laughed loudly, but when Mrs. Weasley came around, looking suspicious they sobered immediately, dipping their spoons back into their soup innocently as if nothing had happened. Harry snorted into his soup.

George caught Hermione's eye and grinned, holding up a small, violently green packet of Cockroach Clusters. Hermione tried not to laugh.

The door opened at that moment, and Mr. Weasley bustled in, his face glowing brilliantly red from the cold, his glasses half-frosted over.

"Evening, Weasleys! And honorary Weasleys!" he called out when he saw Harry and Hermione, and the party inside clamored about in reply.

Hermione smiled, feeling happier than she'd been in a long while. She loved it here, how they all felt like one big family. She had left the ring hidden deep inside her trunk, stored up in Ginny's room, and had wanted to set about destroying it upon arrival, but realized she would have to wait. She didn't mind, much. Sitting at that full and happy table she allowed herself to put her mind off of the dark thoughts that had consumed her for the past several days. For the first time in several months, she felt at home.

Back at Hogwarts, hidden inside the Room of Requirement, Draco was tinkering with the wardrobe, his focus wavering. He had been toiling there nearly the whole day, with no breaks except to eat a quick lunch.

He had not expected to find Granger still in the dorm when he'd woken, knowing that as soon as she left his room she would hasten to put as much space between them as possible. He had pushed her door open anyhow, and looked into her empty room, at the dead fire, at her lonely bed, almost regretting he had not taken the ripe chance he'd given himself to make her spend the night in his bed. No matter. There would be more, later. He had found the ring on the floor and instantly realized her trick.

Clever little bird. He was more amused than angry. She still had fight in her, and he liked that. Loved it.

He thought of her with pleasure, her sweet ass pressing into him, her frantic breathing as he'd thrust against her, thwarted by the barriers of her clothing. That she'd had the foresight to even make a duplicate of the ring spoke to her intelligence, though she should have known better than to attempt to best him. She might have the real one, yes, but did that really count as a win when it was indestructible and he'd managed to prohibit her from telling anyone?

Fight as hard as you can, little bird, he thought, finally stepping away from the cabinet and sitting down into a nearby ancient armchair that had been burnt badly on one side. *You can't stop what's going to happen.*

It was only the first day of the holiday, and already he was bored, restless, impatient to see her again. His father had commanded him to stay at Hogwarts for the break, rightfully saying he needed to take advantage of that time with the castle mostly empty to continue his doings in preparation for the mission. Draco had obeyed but also wished he at least would have been allowed to visit home briefly. Things weren't going well at the Manor at the moment, what with the Dark Lord popping up every now and then. Not that his parent's home had ever been truly a happy place, but the Dark Lord's presence, an honor though it might be, added tension they didn't need. Over the past year, his mother's health had begun to decline, and so there had been a steady stream of Healers coming in and out to analyze her and find the problem, but none had so far come even close, to their frustration. They plied her with draughts and tonics meant to boost one thing or eliminate another, and she took them all and remained the same, in pain and growing weaker slowly, though she rarely complained.

In his last letter home, Draco had asked for information on his mother's current status, and she had replied with a note of her own in which she told him not to get too distracted from his mission.

'There will always be time to come visit me now that I have nothing to do,' her letter read, 'but you must focus on what the Dark Lord has asked of you. I have every belief you'll succeed, and I hope it shall be done quickly. The sooner you accomplish it the sooner you can come home and be firmly in the Dark Lord's good graces.'

Despite her cheerful tone, he still worried. But for now, he was stuck here in a nearly deserted school waiting for the new year to come. So he could prove himself. So he could have the witch who bore his ring.

He thought of his mission, resting his arms over the armchair, spreading his long fingers over the scorched velvet fabric. Dust floated visibly in the air. The room stank of antiquity. The wardrobe was almost ready. Still needed a bit of work, but he was almost there. Suddenly his mind shifted and he thought of her, her smile flashed before his eyes and he heard her beautiful laugh in his head. He recalled her, the feel of her waist under his hand, her soft, warm hand in his as they danced, the ends of her curls brushing his fingers, her eyes staring suspiciously up at his, the sparkling brown of her eyes reeling him in.

She would be with the Weasleys right now. Surrounded by a pack of undeserving blood-traitors, the majority of them men, and among them was Potter. His eyes narrowed. The fool actually thought he had a chance with Granger.

She's mine.

The Imperio would do its work and check her if he couldn't be there, or else Potter would be pawing at his property all throughout the holiday, and he couldn't have that, could he? When they had trained him at home on using the Unforgivable Curses his mother had stressed he not use them at school unless absolutely necessary and all other options had been exhausted. This counted. If the ring could not be worn then an Imperius was just as good. The training had been vigorous-too rigorous. The Dark Lord had taken his highest performing Death Eaters and tasked them with the training. He had been injured on more than one occasion, had failed plenty of times, and they had not been sympathetic. They had laughed or lost their patience, the others who had passed their training years ago. When he had finally completed it and the Dark Lord had given him his mission, his parents had been so proud. Draco had not thought he would use his training as much as he already, much less that it would be Granger who'd take the brunt of it. Still, it had been very satisfying to see the look of surprise on her face in every instance, that she had underestimated him and not thought him capable of what he had done so far.

There's more to come, he promised silently.

Standing back up, he slipped his wand into his pocket and left the secret room. He needed rest.

The days were flying by, and Christmas was approaching fast. Each day was spent merrily, helping Mrs. Weasley with household tasks (not quite so merrily), piling up in one room and sharing stories of interesting things that had happened so far in that term (a conversation during which Hermione said very little), testing more of Fred and George's new products (she stayed away from those), or romping around in the snowy land surrounding the Burrow, building crude things with snow and sticks or hurling snowballs around with magic with high velocity, which resulted predictably in the formation of many bruises and once, in Ron's case, a snow-clogged nostril. She and Harry sat together after dinner, sometimes talking, sometimes quiet, but happy in the other's presence. The house was so full it was hard to find the time or opportunity to be alone. Hermione had visited the Gryffindor Tower frequently over the past several months because she had missed that convivial feeling, even if it had annoyed her in the past, and found it again in spades at the Burrow. Even as she enjoyed it, she couldn't help but feel a thread of anxiety over the reality of having to return to that silent common room, of returning to Malfoy's cold, consuming gaze.

Hermione didn't want to get out of bed that morning. The fire in Ginny's room was lit but the room was still cold, or maybe it was just her. She tucked her blanket around herself and curled into a fetal position in an attempt to preserve warmth. She lasted that way a few minutes before she felt all too clearly the memory of Malfoy's hands gripping her, forcing their bodies to press together, and the warmth she had accumulated so far reminded her of the heat coming from him, the sweat that had rolled down her forehead as he had calmly threatened to rape her for real.

She flung her blanket away from her body and sat up quickly. She looked at Ginny in her bed to see if she had woken her. Ginny slept on her back, one arm on her stomach, the other hooked under her head beneath her pillow.

She looks so peaceful, she thought. Jealousy prodded at her heart. Ginny looked so untroubled and calm that Hermione wanted to cry. She wanted to feel calm, too.

She wished Voldemort was dead and all his followers gone.

She wished Harry could be happy again.

She wished Draco Malfoy didn't exist.

Or rather, she wished things could go back to the way they once were, and whatever sick obsession he had with her didn't exist at all. Every day she would check on the ring in her trunk to make sure it was still there, and that Malfoy had not spirited it away somehow. She began to feel guilty over it, that she checked it so frequently that she had begun faking bathroom breaks when in reality she was digging through her trunk to find it and make sure it was still there. No one seemed to suspect a thing, so she was stuck with her secret, literally feeling it drag her down every time she was around Harry. She wished someone would realize how strangely she was behaving—surely she wasn't the only one who noticed the signs. She'd jump at loud noises, if someone tried to touch her she'd recoil, her heart speeding up. Just the other day, Ron had clumsily grabbed her when she'd tripped on a step, and she'd jerked out of his grip frantically, preferring to fall than to be reminded of Malfoy's icy grip, his long fingers wrapping around her wrists. Of course, she'd always apologize immediately afterward an incident, claiming the stress from the upcoming exams, and they always believed her. She felt relief every time, and a little disheartened.

She just wished none of this had ever happened.

She wished she had never met Draco Malfoy.

If no one else was awake yet, she would take this as a chance to destroy the ring. Hermione got up and changed into some jeans and pulled a jumper on over her pajama shirt. She got the ring from the trunk and put it into her pocket, was in the process of pulling socks on when there was a soft knock on the door that made her jump.

Hermione bolted up, not wanting Ginny to wake up, and hissed, "Who is it?" through the door.

"It's me," Harry spoke softly through the door. "Fancy a walk out in the garden?"

"Sure," Hermione replied, a little dismayed her chance had fallen through. She went to get her boots. "I'll meet you down in the kitchen in a minute."

She met him a short while later, tugging a knit cap over her curls, pulling it down snugly over her ears and forehead. Her jacket buttoned, scarf twined around her neck and snow boots on, she felt dreadfully warm, seeing as they were in the kitchen, but the blush in her cheeks suggested it had more to do with the way Harry was looking at her.

She cleared her throat quietly. "Morning," she forced herself to sound unaffected while willing away the pink in her cheeks.

"Morning," he smiled and gave her a light hug and a kiss on the cheek, and tugging his own hat on, opened the back door and escorted her outside into the biting winter air. Though it was bitterly cold, Hermione gladly felt the last traces of sleep loosen their hold on her and

felt her mind awaken. Harry was walking closely beside her, their shoulders brushed as they walked.

There was no need for conversation so early in the morning. The cold winds and the whispers of the tree branches were enough for the moment, and they walked on in silence, making sure not to pass the protective ward around the Weasley's bit of land. The snow on the ground was slippery, so it was no surprise when Hermione stepped badly and tumbled down into the snow with a sharp intake of breath.

Harry helped her up immediately; she gave a shaky laugh when he brushed a bit off snow off of her chin. Harry admired her flushed face, smiling gently. A glint of something shiny on the ground caught his eye, and he bent to pick it up.

It was a ring. He brushed snow off it with his hand. Surely very expensive, by the large stones it boasted. The green and silver coloring caught him off guard, for it wasn't typical of Hermione to carry around large jewelry, especially if it was in Slytherin colors.

He stood up, and held it out in his palm, noticed the engraving on the inside of the band with some confusion.

Her eyes widened considerably. Her face completely drained of color.

"Is this yours?" he asked. Obviously it was, he thought, otherwise she wouldn't have it with her. But he felt he couldn't ask her what he really wanted to know. Like, for example, why, on the inside, was there engraved, *'Property of DM'*?

Harry only knew only person with those initials and found himself praying to whatever Gods there were up above that this ring had nothing to do with him.

13. The New Year

“Bombarda!” Nothing.

“Confringo!”

Her lungs were on fire; it was hard to breathe. She was sweating profusely despite the cold.

“Reducto!”

How long had she been at this? The moon was prominent in the winter sky, bathing her in its eerie glow.

“Damn it!”

Angry tears clouded her eyes. Nothing was working. She sent a blast of white-hot fire at the object and held it there for thirty seconds but once it died down, the ring was still there, gleaming at her smugly.

Frustrated beyond belief, she threw her wand to the ground. Her hands found their way into her hair and she gripped her head, crying.

The damned ring winked up at her from the ground. The snow it had been resting on had melted away earlier on in her experimenting to destroy it, leaving a wide circle of scorched earth around it.

She’d been up for hours; having first made sure everyone else was asleep and then sneaking out. She had cast a *Silencio* on the area around herself so they would not hear her outside.

She should have felt tired but felt anxious and wired instead, intent to destroy the ring. She had tried every spell she knew, but nothing worked. Not a single imperfection had appeared on it despite her efforts.

The ground was icy cold and hard on her knees but she knelt down anyway and looked at the ring.

Several days ago, Harry had found the ring and asked her about it.

“Hermione? Is this yours?” He had asked. The blood had drained from her face when she saw he was looking at the engraving on the inside. *‘Property of DM.’*

He looked slightly shocked and curious, staring intently at the green stone. Fear overtook her and she panicked, thinking he would immediately know everything she had withheld from him, that he would think she had wanted it because the ring was in her possession.

And she had to stop it.

Swallowing to get past the cotton in her throat, she’d hastened to reply, conjuring a lie as quickly as she could.

"I-It's my great grandmothers'." She blurted, forcing her face into a calm mask.

Merlin knew she was a horrid liar, *but for once*, she prayed, *let me get away with this one*.

"Her husband gave it to her before he died, and she passed it on to my mother before she died, who sent it to me as a Christmas present."

He was still staring at the engraving, and she felt bile rise in her throat. She placed her hand lightly on his shoulder, drawing his attention away from the ring.

"Her name was Dorothy Maud, Harry," she finished.

The suspicion and confusion left his eyes, and he looked up at her solemnly.

"Then why don't you wear it?" he asked. He made to put the ring on her finger but she jerked back, eyes wide.

"N-No!" the concerned look in his eyes intensified. Harry paused, looking alarmed. Mentally, she reprimanded herself.

Straightening her composure, she'd laughed lightly and said, "Really, Harry. You know I'm not one to wear something as ostentatious as that. My mum sent it to me by owl a week ago, but I don't quite know what to do with it." Shrugging, and thankful for the lie that had sprung up from nowhere, she'd taken the ring from him and slipped it back into her pocket.

He stood there for a while, looking at her. She knew he knew that she wasn't telling him the truth, but her fear made her keep her face calm and controlled. After a few seconds, he nodded.

"I'm sorry about your grandmother," he said solemnly. Hermione felt horrid about his sympathy for her non-existent relation, but found herself continuing the lie.

"It's okay," she said. 'She died a few years ago.' She took his hand, tried to muster a convincing smile. "Let's go back inside; I can see Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen. We should help."

Things hadn't been exactly the same after that. Harry knew she was hiding something, but for the love of Merlin, she couldn't bring herself to tell him, and he couldn't bring himself to pressure her to tell him, thinking she needed space and time to process what had happened with McLaggen. Christmas had passed and today was New Year's Eve. Christmas with the Weasleys had been a jolly event. The twins had hidden Mrs. Weasley's old radio in a successful attempt to prevent the annual torture of having to listen to Celestina Warbeck, and everyone had spent the day fooling around, playing with their presents from Fred and George, and breaking out into spectacularly, hilariously bad renditions of the Muggle Christmas songs Harry and Hermione taught them.

Though she was surrounded by people who loved her and whom she loved in return, Hermione grew more anxious with every day that led them closer to their return to Hogwarts. The ring was supposed to be destroyed and useless now but it was intact and malevolent as ever. What would she do when she got back to Hogwarts? Continue to hide it in a perpetual game of keep-away with Malfoy?

Wiping her frustrated tears, she straightened up and shoved the stupid thing back into her pocket.

Draco looked out on the school grounds from his window, his pale eyes sweeping over the barren scenery. He could see smoke coming from the half-giant Hagrid's chimney way down below. The dismal winter landscape failed to catch his attention; there was nothing to see anyway. He let out a bored sigh. He strode out of his room and into the Common Room area, taking one sweeping look at the empty room.

The place was lifeless without her. Her scarf and some of her sweaters still hung on the coat rack, beckoning him closer, an invitation to catch a whiff of her scent. He ignored their call and walked into her room instead, where her scent still lingered faintly.

The last time he had been here, he had slept with her in her bed. He smirked at the memory and looked through the things she had on her dresser. Several magical photographs caught his attention.

Each one had her with Potter and Weasley bearing wide, silly grins. They stood crowded together, with their arms slung over each other's shoulders. One had been taken on the Hogwarts grounds; the school itself was in the background. The others were from a variety of different locations he didn't know about, but he could tell one had been taken at Weasley's house by the cluttered mess in the background. He snorted and set them back down.

He ran his fingers over some dried sprigs of lavender that lay over a large stack of books and caught sight of her pink hair ribbon which he slipped into his pocket. Taking his time, he walked over to her bed and sat down on it, noticing a decorated basket that lay beside it. Lips twitching with amusement, he opened it and raised his brow when he saw the neat stack of knitting supplies and books.

Of course, she would knit before going to sleep. He rolled his eyes, but his interest had been piqued. Draco eyed the books and plucked one out at random, flipping to the title page.

"Pride and Prejudice," he read aloud, flipping through its pages, and then moving on to the rest of the books. Some of them were so worn from frequent readings they were at risk of falling apart completely. Draco had an itching to mend them but refrained from doing so, as she would notice immediately. He fell asleep on her bed, using her pillow, wishing she was there.

Harry watched Hermione out of the corner of his eye as she spoke with Ron and George, smiling as they teased her about a Quidditch team name she had just mispronounced. Hermione flushed and responded to their ribbing by making a rude gesture with her hand, which made them explode into delighted laughter. She turned and caught Harry watching, smiled guiltily.

It was nearing midnight; they only had one minute until it was the New Year. The rest of the family was preparing for the countdown. Mrs. Weasley had rushed into the kitchen to

gather some drinks. Harry tapped on her shoulder lightly, and said, “Will you go outside with me for a bit?”

Hermione faltered in her speech, and looked at him, confused for a second or two. George and Ron hurriedly began talking about another topic.

“But what about everyone else?” she asked, unaware of the knowing smile Molly was giving her.

“Don’t worry, dear, we’re not going anywhere,” she said kindly, winking at Harry, who blushed. “Go take a walk about the garden, but mind the wards!” she added seriously.

Hermione relented and got up, shrugging on her coat and hat. Harry followed suit, and they stepped into the still, frigid night air.

The stars shone beautifully up above them despite the frigid chill. Icicles hung glistening and sharp from the roof. Harry could feel his feet turning numb inside his boots. He glanced at his watch—he had seconds left.

“Hermione,” he began, and she turned to look at him.

“Will you be my girlfriend?” he asked, holding her hands gently.

Hermione stared wide-eyed at him, her mind having frozen. A slow grin worked itself onto her face, and all her worries flew out of her mind for that instant.

“Yes,” she answered shyly. “I think I will.”

Harry grinned at her, and brought his hand to her chin, drawing her closer. Hermione’s breath hitched, and she watched, half afraid, half ecstatic as his face hovered closer, waiting to see if she was comfortable. Suddenly impatient, she closed the gap between their lips just as the occupants inside the house cheered, quickly calling out ‘Happy New Year’s to hide the fact they had been watching from the kitchen windows. Hermione felt as though she were walking on a cloud, feeling his warm, soft lips pressed onto her own.

This is what a kiss should be like, she decided as he cupped the back of her head with his other hand, deepening their kiss. *Not like those horrible ones **he** forced on me.*

She was so elated; she didn’t feel the ring grow hotter in her pocket.

And back at Hogwarts, a boy with shockingly blond hair awoke with a start, knowing what had just happened.

14. Control

I don't own Harry Potter.

Hermione looked uneasily around the corridor. Anxiety continued to creep up her spine and cloud her mind. It was already the end of their first week back and so far there had been no sign of Malfoy. Her time table for the week showed she had no classes with the Slytherins and that helped, but she knew she had to stay on her guard. Wherever she went, she made sure she was never alone. She had refused to go back to the Head dorms, instead sending a House Elf to gather her things (and she still hated herself for it, for running away) and had parked herself into the empty bed beside Ginny's back in the Gryffindor Tower. Ginny had been too happy to have her friend back to wonder why she would not go back to her own dorm.

Now, as they made their way into the dungeons she couldn't stop shaking. The prospect of seeing Malfoy again made her sick; she felt a sense of shame she knew had no place inside her but still it remained, and the longer it stayed the less she wanted to confront the problem.

"You're shaking an awful lot. Are you sick?" Ron observed, turning to look at her.

Hermione couldn't bear to lie. "I don't know. I just don't feel well." She shuddered rather violently, and Harry felt her forehead.

"You're ice-cold," he said. "You can't go to class like this, Hermione. I'll take you to the Hospital Wing."

A light sheen of sweat broke out on her forehead, and she truly felt dreadful, but she shook her head determinedly.

"No, no. I'll be fine. I just want to sleep this off later." She fought off a wave of nausea and strode into the classroom, sitting down at her shared desk with Harry. Ron sat with Neville in front of them.

Professor Snape was sitting at his desk, glaring at them as they entered as usual. Hermione extracted her books from her bag and set them down on the wooden surface, looking around the room, remembering they would share this class with the Hufflepuffs. She felt pressure come off her shoulders and relaxed slightly, looked to the front of the room. Quite by accident, she ended up locking eyes with the Potions Professor.

Another tremor threatened to rock through her, but she stiffened her muscles in an attempt to not show weakness in the hateful man's eyes. That unsettling stare held her for a moment, and rather than glaring at her, he seemed to be studying her. A blush worked its way up her face and he rolled his eyes before settling them on her again. Hermione didn't dare blink.

That haggard, sallow face had an expression of utmost concentration and she stiffened once more, believing him to be attempting to use Occlumency on her. Feeling no unusual

presence in her mind, however, she settled for frowning at him. He had not taken his eyes off her, his sunken, pale face remaining as stoic as it had ever been, but there was a change so slight she hardly noticed it until seconds later, when the eye contact had been broken.

She was perplexed. Had she just seen pity in his face? It had only been a quick flash of emotion before he'd sneered and turned back to the board, but what did it mean? Clearly he knew something she didn't, and her brain ached just to think about it, overridden as it was.

As he gave his lecture, Professor Snape walked between the aisles of desks slowly, looking over each student as if daring them to fall asleep in front of him. Hermione could barely concentrate due to her pounding headache, but she would rather transfer to the Slytherin House than let a silly virus get the better of her. Harry glanced at her neat, perfect notes and looked at his own in dismay before shoving them into his bag as the bell rang. Hermione sighed, tucking her quill into her bag.

Everyone began to leave the room. Hermione was getting up from her seat when Snape approached and lingered in front of her desk.

"I must speak with you before you go, Ms. Granger," he said in his monotone voice, and went back to his desk.

Harry and Ron turned to her, asking a question with their eyes.

"What did you do?" Ron asked, as if incredulous that it had not been him asked to stay after class.

"Go on," she said. "I'll meet you later." Ron nodded and went for the door, casting her a sympathetic glance. Harry squeezed her hand lightly and went off.

Hermione approached the Professor warily, feeling like her eleven-year-old self as he fixed his eyes on her once more.

"You wanted to speak with me, Professor?"

He nodded and walked to his desk, sitting down in the old leather chair.

"Have you noticed anything strange happening as of late?" Although curt, his voice lacked its usual disdain, which surprised her and made her suspicious at once.

"No, Professor."

"No?" Clearly, he didn't believe her. "Certain people have not been behaving... unusually, or... breaking rules?"

Hermione faltered.

What was he hinting at? Was he referring to Harry and Ron? As far as she was aware they hadn't done anything reckless in a while... could he know about Malfoy? *How?* Some part of her felt relieved at the thought that someone knew what was happening to her, and she wondered if she could trust in the man before her for help, but something inside her told her to keep quiet. Dumbledore might trust in Snape, but he was no friend to her, and she still had her suspicions regarding the Potions Professor. She decided to play clueless.

"Is there someone you have in mind, Professor? I could talk to them."

His stare continued. She couldn't tell whether this was an attempt to reach out or intimidate her.

"I don't think a mere talking to is going to make things any better," he said, and the hairs on Hermione's arms bristled.

"In that case, I'll do my best to keep an eye on things, Professor," she said as calmly as she could though calm was the last thing she felt. "If there's anything else you feel I should know?" she gave him a pointed look. She had no time for his foul moods and vague questions. That he got the hint was obvious, but apparently that day he felt like being as vague as possible, for his response was most unsatisfactory.

"I encourage you, Miss Granger, to stay alert and on your guard this coming Spring," he stated in a low, careful tone. "The changing of seasons always brings surprises; some may not be as pleasant as others. Do not be afraid to reach out to your Head of House if there are problems."

It's too late for that talk, she thought bitterly. And it's my own fault for not doing it sooner.

"Of course, Professor."

His unsettling, gleaming eyes stayed fixed onto hers, and Hermione found it difficult to look away. What was he trying to tell her? Such a strange warning. Could it be about Malfoy? Or something else?

Looking away at last, the Professor picked up his quill and waved a large, bony hand at her in dismissal.

"You may go."

Still frowning, Hermione picked up her bag and set off at a quick clip down the hall, a sharp pain poking at her temple. She was not feeling any better, especially after that curious conversation. His words replayed in her head.

Spring. Something was coming. Was it Voldemort? Would he dare come to Hogwarts again? She winced at a particularly painful dart of pain on the left side of her forehead. She was feeling worse than she had been earlier. Could she endure through the rest of her classes for that day?

Maybe I should go and sleep this off, she thought wearily, loosening her tie. She had to see if Georgie was around—she hadn't answered Hermione's inquiry to change patrol partners again, and it had been days since she'd sent that first note. She set out for the Gryffindor tower, but a deafening racket greeted her just as she stepped over the threshold. A small group of lower years was shouting and pushing at each other, flinging hexes about in the otherwise empty common room. Luckily, everyone else was at lunch in the great hall, but the common room was a mess.

Just what I need, she thought sarcastically.

Hermione saw red. At the same moment, she dropped her school bag to the floor, with the other arm she raised her wand and emitted a loud bang that shook the room. They stopped immediately, looking over to her with flushed, angry faces.

“Who started this?” she asked. They all began to talk at once, pointing fingers and shoving each other to face her. Another bang and the culprits stepped forward sheepishly.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I suppose someone insulted someone else or something like that and you all decided to have a Wizard’s duel?” They nodded, muttering something about insults each had said to the other, and that someone had cheated at a game they had been playing which had started the whole thing.

“Well you should be ashamed of yourselves. There is absolutely no dueling or fighting of any manner in the Common Room area or your dorms. Ten points from each of you. Has anyone been harmed?” They shook their heads. “Good. Detention for each of you for one week with Filch. Now please pick up this mess or I will be forced to call Professor McGonagall.”

Their sullen, ashamed faces stayed in her mind as she climbed up the tower to the Girls’ Dormitories. Lavender and Parvati smiled at her as she walked in, and resumed their chatter. Something about another Ravenclaw boy, apparently. She scribbled a note on a piece of parchment, charmed it to fly to Harry and Ron in the Great Hall to let them know she wasn’t going to lunch but going to sleep instead. She quickly changed into something more comfortable and climbed under her covers, drawing the curtains shut around her. She lay there for a moment, her eyes closed, listening to the murmur of her schoolmates’ conversation, but that only contributed to her headache after a while so she closed the curtains around her bed, cast a *Silencio* on them, and drifted into an uneasy sleep at last.

“How did you know?” Draco asked woodenly.

“You made no attempt to hide it at the dance. Others may have been blind to it, but not me.”

“It isn’t your business,” Draco said

“That may be true,” Snape acknowledged, “But I am merely curious as to your sudden and surprising interest in the girl.”

“I want her. That should be simple enough for you to understand. Since when do you care about anything?” Draco asked, scoffing.

“I care when it involves what you intend to do regarding your plan,” Snape replied coolly. “The Dark Lord informed me of it, and when I saw your behavior regarding Ms. Granger at the ball, also considering your past, I assume I’m correct in assuming her sentiment regarding you is the absolute opposite.”

Draco stood stiffly, his cold blue-grey eyes betraying no emotion.

The Professor regarded the young man in front of him before speaking again. “If you prevail in your mission, the Dark Lord will honor you more than any other in his confidence. You could have anything you wish for. You don’t have to choose her. You will be allowed to join his ranks as his most trusted follower. You could have thrice your weight in gold, you could claim this very castle for our side if you so wish. Yet all you want is a schoolgirl who

couldn't care less about you. Do you realize that she doesn't love you, and likely never will, especially if you do what you are planning?"

"There are ways around that."

"This is a very dangerous path you are treading, Draco."

"And yours has been lined by unicorns, in comparison?"

Snape fixed him with a cold glare. "If you had wooed her from the beginning she might be more receptive to your advances. You've made this infinitely harder for yourself. Complete your mission, join the Dark Lord and ask him for gold or whatever else. Leave the girl be. I cannot condone what you intend to do."

Draco tensed at the Professor's words. "What do I need more gold for? Suddenly you're her champion? I didn't ask for your blessing. I will succeed and I *will* have her. But I won't join the Dark Lord. I will serve him, but only on my own terms."

Snape gave him a challenging stare. "You must do well for him to agree to that. What will you do with her once you have acquired her?"

Draco walked to the door. "I shall do with her as I see fit."

He exited the room and headed for his dorm slowly, letting his mind run. Granger had not come back to the Head Common Rooms after the break, which infuriated him. Since that night he had woken with the image of Potter planting his lips on hers burning in his mind he had waited for her return, his fury building with each day, wondering what she had done with the ring. She had not been able to destroy it. He would have sensed it if she had.

Wherever she'd put it, he would find it and alter the spells on it. He had learned his lesson. He had forbidden her from having sex with Potter, and when he'd seen them kiss in his dream had realized his mistake. On his walk he passed by a gaggle of Gryffindors on their way downstairs—he looked for Granger among them but she was not there. He felt his mood darken and walked on.

I'm going to make it so you can never run from me.

For now, though, he had the task before him to go to the trouble of catching her again.

But how?

Wherever she went he followed stealthily, hoping for a chance to catch her unawares. The only problem was that she surrounded herself with companions wherever she was so he could not strike. A clever move, and he admired her for it, but he was growing impatient. The Common Room was insufferable without her in it and he wanted her back all for himself.

But she was determined to run.

Let her, he thought, grinning suddenly. Let her think she's got a chance. Let her think she's safe for now. Let her feel safe in Potter's arms before I rip her away.

He reached the Head Common Room and muttered the password quietly. "Persephone."

The portrait swung open and he stepped inside, growing angry again at knowing she was not there. He hated how barren it was in here without her. It was too quiet, and strangely, too

dark, but it would not remain that way for long, he assured himself, and smiling, he shut himself into his room.

Harry and Hermione sat outside, tucked away in the skywalk, watching the students mill about on the school grounds below them. As they breathed, their breaths puffed out from between their lips. They had reached mid-February, the cold seeped everywhere its ghostly hands could reach, while Spring's promise grew sweeter every day.

Though Snape's warning still hounded her mind frequently, Hermione was calmer than she had been in a long time. These moments with Harry helped to chase her troubles away. Malfoy was subdued and distant these days, ignoring her when she was around, but during meal times and class she would catch him watching her. It was awful—his hungry stares threatened to overwhelm her whenever they shared the room. She always made sure to leave the classes they shared with the Slytherins accompanied by Harry and Ron. Malfoy had not bothered her since they had come back—she'd wanted to take that as a sign of his defeat, but the way he looked at her suggested this was nowhere near over. Luckily, that was the extent of his harassment since they had come back, so as long as he wasn't attacking her or forcing more cursed jewelry onto her, so she could not complain.

She had gone to McGonagall's office the day they had come back to Hogwarts and tried to tell her everything. McGonagall had sat patiently and Hermione had opened her mouth to spill it all, and found that nothing would come out. She had tried over and over until she made herself cough, and McGonagall had offered her water. Hermione apologized, and feeling very stupid and embarrassed and defeated, made up another reason for having visited her, and asked questions about the topic they had discussed in Transfiguration class the day before. She had cried in the loo after that, not remembering Malfoy's command that she would not be aware she was still under his Imperius curse, and that he had forbidden her from telling anyone what he had done to her. She had not tried again since, fearing the same result.

"I never did ask you what happened at your meeting with Dumbledore," Hermione said softly, leaning into Harry's shoulder.

Harry shrugged his free shoulder. "I told him about the dream, and he said it would be best not to ignore it. Do you think it has anything to do with what Snape told you?" She frowned and bit at her lip.

"I believe so. I hope it's all a farce and nothing happens," she admitted quietly after a moment. "But then we would never be prepared, would we?"

Harry nodded and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Whatever comes, we'll deal with it," he promised. Hermione tilted her head up and shifted so she could lean in and kiss him soundly. His lips pressed into hers and she smiled, wrapping her arms around his neck, her heart beating faster. The warmth of his lips bled into hers and she felt a tingling start inside her, shooing the cold out of her body as he ran a hand over her curls and licked at her lush lower lip. Hermione, not being knowledgeable in the art of kissing, was finding it rather hard to breathe.

“Well isn’t this a pretty sight?” a cold, mocking voice startled them. “If only I’d brought a camera.”

Blushing furiously, Hermione jumped up and saw to her shock and dismay that Malfoy was standing behind them, face twisted in contempt.

Harry rolled his eyes and stood up. “Sod off, Malfoy.”

The Slytherin only smirked. “Ten points from Gryffindor for insulting Head Boy. Thirty points each for that disgusting display of affection in public.”

Hermione was seething. Couldn’t he just leave her alone? “You’re docking unnecessary points. We’re not breaking any rules and we’re not around to shock anyone except you, who just *happened* to show up at this exact spot.”

Draco looked at his little lioness, blushing with anger and embarrassment at having been caught. If it weren’t for Bloody Saint Potter standing there with his damned hand on her waist, he would have thrown her to the ground and taken her every way he knew how.

But now was not the time. There were more pressing matters at hand. Though he would have loved to continue their little argument, he had run out of patience at last. He’d never been one to wait, especially not where she was concerned.

Still, the pair stood close together, Granger’s lips pink from their kissing, and the anger that it caused in him sparked forward a new idea.

“McGonagall needs to speak with us, Granger,” he drawled, inspecting his sleeves.

She paled. Harry pulled her to him and gave her a lingering kiss.

“I have to go to Quidditch practice anyway,” he said, “I’ll see you at dinner?” Hermione nodded and watched him leave, fighting the urge to run after him so she wouldn’t be alone as the Slytherin crept up behind her.

“So I gave you a ring and you go running to Potter for safety?” he hissed into her ear, making her jump. She inched backward, glaring at him, her wand in her hand.

“It’s none of your business,” she spat.

He raised an eyebrow. “I do believe it is, Granger. Or by chance did you forget our little encounter before the holiday?”

“I don’t think anyone could forget something as horrible as that.”

“I have quite the opposite view of it,” he said. “Have you figured out yet I’ve been sleeping with you most nights?”

She raised her chin defiantly. “Rot in hell, you disgusting *bastard*.”

Malfoy stared at her, one hand playing with the signet ring he wore around his little finger.

“Potter’s made you brave, has he? How revoltingly sweet. Where’s the ring?”

She had planned to say no, but as her mouth opened, different words took shape and horrified, she found herself telling him the truth against her own wishes.

"In my trunk in Gryffindor Tower."

Her hand flew to her mouth afterward to block the words but it was too late, and she looked at him wide-eyed.

"Remember," he ordered. "Remember my orders from that night."

She obeyed and did, and suddenly it made sense.

"Leave me alone," she said with a shaking voice. "Stop all this, *please*. I've had enough."

"Come here," he ordered.

Hermione tried to fight the Imperius but her body went to him and stood close before him. His eyes roved over her, drinking in their fill. She flushed, not liking the dark intensity in his normally clear eyes.

"What did McGonagall want?" she asked, hoping it would deter him.

"Nothing. She's only curious as to why you aren't back in the Head dorms. I told her you've been having an extended sleepover with your Gryffindor friends. Now hold still."

He raised his hand, extended it to brush her cheek.

"I've missed you," he said softly.

Hermione stiffened. "I'm not going back. Not in a million years."

He tilted his head, raised his eyebrows, grinning. "Not even for me?"

She shuddered, "I refuse to be in the same living quarters as you."

"Well, you're going to have to suck it up and live with it, Granger. This is an order. I want you back there every day. No getting around it. Plus," he added in a husky tone, "I've been feeling a little lonely." He leaned in closer. She couldn't lean away.

"You're vile," she said stiffly.

"Hush, Granger. You're going to return to our dorm and you're going to share my bed whether you like it or not. I had half a mind to order you to break up with Potter and break his heart but this is more fun. You'll get to bask in the guilt of satisfying me at night and returning to him in the morning. That's what you earned yourself for your little trick with the ring. I expect you to bring it with you when you come back to the dorm."

He let her go.

"Go about your day normally. Meet me at the dorm tonight after dinner. And don't try that nonsense about switching patrol partners again. You're stuck with me."

She left, her expression of hate smoothed into a calm one by his order, and went back into the castle. Draco watched her leave, satisfaction and arousal entwining inside of him.

"You're in an awfully good mood," Blaise remarked as his companion tucked into his roast chicken.

Draco couldn't help but grin. "Things are looking up. The time is drawing near."

Blaise's eyes widened for a second and then his face returned to its usual neutral expression.

"What was Snape talking to you about earlier?"

Draco took a sip from his goblet, watching the witch sitting one table away, immersed in a conversation with Longbottom, who was gesturing animatedly to a book he was reading. His oddball companion, (Lovegood, was it?) was gazing around the Great Hall with wide, glassy orbs. It took him a second to realize she had caught him staring at Granger and she frowned slightly before he looked away at last.

"He was concerned about my interest in Granger," he said nonchalantly as he returned to his food.

"Now *that's* something," Blaise chuckled, "Snape showing concern for someone other than himself."

Nodding, Draco watched as the Head Girl departed from the Gryffindor table, calling out a cheery 'Goodnight!' and walking out the Hall, shouldering her school bag.

"I should go," Draco said, and pushed away from the table, leaving as swiftly as he could so he would not draw attention to himself.

He took his time, walking a bit of a distance behind her as she made her way to their dorms. It had been a long time since he'd had her all to himself, excluding their rendezvous in the bridge. She finally noticed him as she turned a corner and his movement caught her eye.

"You couldn't have given me peace until I reached the dorm?" She asked coldly.

"Seeing as we're both finished with dinner and heading to the same location, Granger, no," he stuck his hands into his trouser pockets and walked alongside the frustrated witch, who was doing her best to keep a large distance between them. Draco had no trouble keeping pace with her, but at length, she stopped abruptly to face him.

"I'm only going back on the condition you never harass me again. *Fuck* your Imperius. No touching ever, nothing inappropriate. Not even one bawdy joke, you hear me? You make one wrong move and I'll make sure you regret it." She held out her hand. "Have we got a deal?"

"Not bloody likely," Draco snapped angrily. "I don't get any say? What's in it for me?"

Hermione fingered her wand. "If you keep to the agreement you get to keep your bits."

A harsh laugh escaped him and he resumed walking. She caught up to him quickly.

"You realize, sweetheart, that I can control you as long as I want with either the Imperius or the ring, and have no need of your little agreements?"

"I mean it, Malfoy," she hissed. "Take this curse off me. I'm asking you to respect me as a person and to treat me as such. If you can't agree to these terms then I swear I'll find a way to tell someone. I'll get the Ministry involved if I have to."

No, you won't, Draco thought. I won't allow it.

Out loud, he said, “Don’t fuss, Granger. We’ll work something out.”

That pacified her a little, thankfully, and she kept silent after that. When they reached the portrait it dawned on her that she did not know the new password.

Stepping aside, she glared at him. “After you.”

He stepped forward, smirking. “My, how polite,” he laughed, and said the password clearly for her to hear and remember.

“Persephone.” The entrance opened and he stepped inside, catching her wrist as she tried to walk past him to her own room.

The tip of her wand pressed into his jaw, and he loosened his hold on her but did not let her go.

Stepping closer, he pressed his body into hers, locking their gazes together. Fear and hate were visible in her eyes, but her jaw was set and she did not back away, only digging her wand further into his flesh.

“Get. Away. From. Me,” she snarled quietly, and just that tone of her voice sent his blood running down to his groin.

“Or what, love? You’ll kill me?” he taunted.

She seemed to relish the thought, but he knew better.

“I don’t think you have it in you, but you’re welcome to try. You’ll have shocked me for the first time if you do it” he said, and a split second later he hurtled into their shared table with the force of her spell. Standing back up quickly, he grit his teeth, his spine burning in pain.

“I told you not to touch me,” she said as she stepped closer, twirling her wand in her nimble fingers. She aimed at him again. “Care to repeat your comment?”

Wiping a spot of blood from his lip, Draco sat up, grinning, letting his forearm rest on his knee.

“I said, I don’t think you have it in you. What’s more, I don’t think you ever will. You’re clever, I’ll give you that. But you hide behind your book smarts. Is there anything else you can do, other than recite every chapter of the latest book you’ve read?”

He watched her falter for a split second before she advanced again, immobilizing him with a wave of her wand.

“I’m not just clever,” she hissed, stepping towards him. “There’s *plenty* I can do, and it’s certainly more than you ever will.”

“Says the one under the Imperius. Go on, hex me again if it will help relieve your stress, though I have a better solution for that.” He gave her a wicked grin.

Her eyes narrowed. “Imperio!”

He raised his hand and lazily deflected the spell, advanced toward her.

"That's all the tries you get," he said, standing inches from her. "Set your wand down on the table."

She did, struggling to fight his lingering Imperius.

"Does it feel good, doing all this and not letting me fight back at all?" She whispered as he put his hands on her waist, trying to push his hands off. "Does that make you feel strong?"

"Stay still," he ordered. "And when you learn to behave, I'll take the curse off. Of course, by then you'll be wearing the ring permanently so there's no point."

He backed her into the wall roughly, one hand traveling up to cup her throat. Hermione grunted in pain. He kissed her hungrily, his tongue slipping into her mouth, the hand on her waist snaking down to grope at her bottom.

He broke away to catch his breath.

"Don't do this," Hermione said, breathing fast.

He let her go and turned away. "Follow me."

"No." But her body was obeying already. Hermione tried holding onto the frame of the door but she went through anyway.

Bad things had happened here before and worse things were likely to happen now. Instinct screamed at her to run, to fight, to get out of there before something happened but she couldn't move. He closed the door behind her.

"Let me out, Malfoy. Don't do this."

He was undressing, already having taken off his shoes, now working on his school shirt.

"Don't you dare come any closer," she said fiercely, holding her arms out, her shaking palms open and shielding her from him. "You promised!"

"No, Granger, I didn't. I said we would work something out."

She lowered her hands slightly and looked at him with angry, questioning eyes. "Well?"

"Give me the ring," he ordered. "I know you have it on you."

Don't do it! Don't don't don't! she screamed at herself, watching in horror as her own body disobeyed her pleas and she reached into the secret pocket she had sewn into her robes, drawing out the hated ornament, and placed it into his palm.

He watched her inner struggle with amusement and tucked the ring into his own pocket. Noticing the look of immense relief on her face, he said, "Don't do that. Don't give yourself hope. I've realized some of the spells I put on it need altering before you wear it again."

Ring forgotten, he went to his bed, taking off his trousers to reveal his boxers. Hermione refused to look at him.

Helpless, she stood there waiting, still under his control, praying his next command would be for her to leave.

“Come to me,” he purred, and she fought the urge to obey, even as she took the necessary steps forward to stand in front of him as he stood, settling his hands on her arms and ran them down slowly to her hips.

“You will sleep with me tonight,” he announced slyly. Beneath his hands, her body began to tremble. “Now, take your shoes off.”

He slid her robe off her shoulders slowly, and took off her jumper and tie, ordered her to slip off her shoes. Once she’d placed her mary-janes beside his bed, she stood, stoic, betraying the panic she truly felt within. He leaned down and kissed her, tracing her lips with his tongue as his hands worked the zipper of her skirt, pulling it down over her hips, letting it fall down to the floor before his hands trailed back up under her long school shirt, greedily feeling the curves of her body that the shirt hid as she trembled. His eyes were stuck on her cherry-red knickers, glazed with lust.

He reached to start unbuttoning her shirt. Her hands gripped his. He looked up at her.

“Not this,” she said, not looking him in the eye, her voice wavering. “It stays on.”

“Fine,” he conceded after a pause. “But take your bra off.”

Hermione shut her eyes, turning redder and redder as she obeyed and let her bra fall to the floor. She wanted to vomit. Was he going to rape her? She fought against his Imperius, struggling to regain control over herself as he rose from the bed and his lips took over hers. Although he had let her keep her shirt on she knew her nipples would be visible through the white fabric. As he kissed her his hands were on her breasts, kneading and groping them roughly, and though she had tried to keep from crying she couldn’t any longer.

“Respond to me,” he growled, and she snapped.

“N-No!” she stammered from underneath his lips, turning her face away, hands raised and poised to shove.

Moving quickly, Draco caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and applied enough pressure to make tears form in her wide eyes. He exerted more control in his Imperius, enough to quiet her and make her fling her arms around his neck rather robotically and kiss him back.

A groan escaped him and he slid his tongue past her lips—his hand wound around her neck. She moaned into his mouth and the sound went straight to his cock. One hand slid down to her vulva, grasping underneath her shirt, one finger rubbing insolently against her. Hermione let out a cry into his mouth, even as she pushed her hips into his hand, and he felt the first of her tears smear against his cheek.

She tried to fight off the spell desperately, but each time he felt her about to break the surface or resist he pushed her back down, tightening his hold on her.

Somehow they ended up on the bed, a tangle of limbs and hair. He flipped her over so she was straddling him, her curls falling down like curtains over them. Though she was kissing him, he felt her tears dripping onto him and he frowned, knowing she was thinking of Potter. Angrily, he trapped her underneath him again, grinding his erection into her flesh.

"Stay still," he whispered. She whimpered, clutching at his sleeves and drawing him closer.

Gods, he wanted her so badly, but he wouldn't take her now. The timing wasn't right—nor the place. He had a different idea, though. He ordered her to stay on the bed and climbed off to take off his boxers. It seemed he must have lost a little control on the Imperio when he straddled her again, his cock erect and dangling heavily onto her lower body because she began to sob in earnest, squeezing her eyes shut and tried to push him away. Her legs clamped together and she recoiled from him, trying to smooth down her shirt to cover her hips.

"I'm not going to take you now, darling," he murmured into her ear. "Not yet..."

He unbuttoned the topmost portion of her shirt.

"Relax yourself," he said to her, watching her extremely distressed expression fade. "This isn't going to hurt at all. In fact, it's going to feel very good for you."

He pushed aside the fabric to reveal a breast and stared at it hungrily, at the pert little nipple, stiff with fear and cold and bent down to greet it with his tongue.

She cried out again, turning her head on the pillow to look away from what he was doing.

"Stop," she pleaded, gripping his shirt in white-knuckled fists.

His mouth had wrapped around her nipple—he alternated between sucking on it and stroking it with a flattened tongue. She shifted underneath him in discomfort. He took her hand and placed it on his cock. She didn't try to fight again, his increased force on the spell had her docile as a lamb. For all his effort it seemed something was still missing—her eyes were mutinous. She glared daggers up at him and he wrapped her delicate fingers around his throbbing cock, moaning in pleasure. A great shudder ripped through him and he tore himself away from her breast to claim her lips again. His hand tightened over hers as she continued stroking it up and down; he arched his back and bit into her shoulder hard enough to draw a bead of blood. She gave a small, but he continued to guide her hand in pumping his cock to completion. As if in denial, she turned her head into the pillow, tears leaking down her face.

"Look at me, Granger," he hissed. Reluctant, but still under the influence of his spell she faced him, brown eyes full of hate as she stroked him. He made her move her hand faster, the pleasure built and his back arched, felt himself tighten and he came hard, ejaculating quite a bit onto her shirt.

In his post-orgasmic state didn't see her palm streaking towards his face in time enough to stop it.

The cracking sound of flesh striking flesh filled the room for that instant. Draco merely gave her a cold look and climbed off her. She sat up immediately, unable to leave the bed because of his order to stay on it, and crying, buttoned her shirt back up. She wiped at her clothing and her hand with his bedsheets frantically. He pulled his boxers back on before muttering a Scourgify and his mess disappeared from her shirt.

He got back onto the bed, pulled her to him.

"I, for one, enjoyed that."

She clawed at his hands, which were settled around her waist.

"I *didn't*!" Her elbow slammed into his diaphragm hard and Draco hissed in fury.

"You've got yourself a death wish, haven't you, Granger? You're just asking for me to make it so you can be willing and ready when I fuck you properly, is that right?"

"That's never going to happen if I can help it," she said hoarsely. "The only thing I'm asking for is for you to let me go and leave me alone. Or die, that would be infinitely better."

"You're in no position to ask such a thing, Granger. It seems you still haven't learned your lesson," he mused as he played with a lock of her hair.

She grit her teeth. "What lesson?"

"The one about insulting your superiors. That's about the fifth time you slap me, am I correct? It doesn't really matter, because you'll pay for that," he warned, pulling her into his chest. She struggled to free herself, but she was tired, both mentally and physically from what had just taken place. Tears coursed down her face as Draco held onto her tighter, preventing escape. His hand cupped a breast, stroked her nipple idly.

"I don't want to sleep with you," she said shakily, "Please, Malfoy."

"Go to sleep," he murmured and drifted off into a content slumber as the witch cried in his arms.

When he awoke the first thing he did was look to his right, where she was still asleep. Her face was pale and had some of her hairs sticking to it due to the vast amount of tears she had shed the night before. He shifted and reached out to stroke her face gently, tracing her lips with his fingertips.

After a moment, she sighed and muttered, "Harry," in her sleep.

He froze and his hand went to her neck, squeezing painfully. Instantly her eyes flew open and she tried to scream. He could pinpoint the exact moment her dreams were replaced with the apparently terrifying realization of his presence before he clamped his lips over hers possessively. Granger beat her fists against his chest, finally pushing him away with all the strength she could muster.

Perhaps it was only due to the shadow from the curtains around his bed but when she looked at him his eyes were dark and charcoal-colored instead of the normal icy blue. Filled with terror, Hermione instantly maneuvered herself to slide off the bed from underneath him. His hand pressed hard into her stomach before she could go too far.

"Don't you ever say his name when you're in my bed," he snarled. Her hands clawed at his, still tight around her neck. Hermione bucked underneath him as she gasped for air, but said nothing. He released her and she subsided, coughing violently.

"I hate you," she rasped.

He bent over her and kissed her, his hand running along the curve of her waist and hip.

"That's a shame. It won't do for the future Mrs. Malfoy to despise her husband, now, would it?" Draco laughed at the incredulous expression on her face. "Why does that surprise

you? Did you think the ring meant nothing?"

"Absolutely not. I would rather marry Cormac McLaggen instead of you. A hippogriff, even."

Draco watched her through hooded eyes.

"Speaking of your attacker, Granger, have you heard of him lately?"

She looked at him for a moment, narrowing her eyes. "He was expelled. His parents took him home."

He cocked his head. "I heard he disappeared after Christmas. His poor parents are frantic with worry."

Horror dawned over her. "What did you do?"

He raised his brows. "Me? I've done nothing. I only just heard about it and wondered if you knew."

"I don't believe you."

"That's fair. You can get up off the bed, now."

She did so eagerly, her hands on the hem of her shirt, trying to cover her knickers.

He approached her, holding her skirt, and had her step into it, ran it up her hips and tucked her shirt into it. He zipped it back up slowly and then handed back her bra, shoes, and tie, which she held under her arm. He took a moment to run his hand through her hair softly, settling it back down from its sleep-induced wildness.

"My previous orders still stand. You will move back into our dorm without raising a fuss. You will not speak to anyone about what happened here last night or this morning. Not Potter, not Weasley, Longbottom, or anyone else. Understood?"

"Understood." Her lips raised in a snarl.

Irresistible, he thought, and while she remained under control of his spell he leaned in close, cupping her face between his palms, and placed a kiss on her jaw. Another on the hollow of her throat. One more on her clothed breast, and the last on her dry, trembling lips.

"Go get some sleep, sweetling," he murmured, "and be sure to dream of me."

He gave her wand back and ushered her out of his room, and just before he closed the door, he taunted, "Remember to think of me while you're snogging Potter!"

Hermione walked to her room, took another scalding bath, undressed and lay on her bed, wanting nothing more than to cry or scream but her mind was oddly blank; perhaps because of the Imperius. It was still dark out, but she knew the sun would rise soon. It was the weekend anyway, so she huddled into a ball on her bed and slept through a maze of nightmares, each one worse than the last, but all revolving around a certain ocean-eyed Slytherin who it seemed was bent upon ruining her life.

15. Lucius Malfoy

I don't own Harry Potter.

Draco wandered around the Common Room, pausing every now and then to glance at the fireplace. Try and try as he might he simply couldn't keep his mind off her; his little enchantress. Ever since the night of the forced wank he had hardly seen her around, she had been going to bed and waking up even earlier than she normally did in order to avoid him. A little annoying—he'd have to order her to stop that nonsense the next time he saw her. He just had to get her alone again. She, Potter, and Weasley had been absent from every meal most of the week; he'd heard from some loud-mouthed Gryffindor that they'd been eating in the Gryffindor Tower instead. He wondered how she'd gone about managing that without telling them her reasons for not wanting to be in the Great Hall.

He glanced at the fireplace again.

His father was due for a visit. They had found a way around Floo Network barriers that would ordinarily have detected him and had arranged a meeting of sorts. Seeing as Granger currently was hiding in the library or with the Gryffindors again, he figured he'd had enough time for a social visit. Even now he still posed a great risk, hosting his father here even if it would be a short visit, but seeing as they very rarely got visitors in their dorm he figured it wasn't that big a risk.

Still, he could have just sent me a letter.

Draco was unsure as to why he would even bother taking all the trouble to come here. To be sure, he had a strong suspicion for his father's motive, and was quite confident he would be correct. But only time would tell if he was.

So he waited there, looking out the window at the school grounds, where the grass was quickly regaining its color in the patches where the snow had melted, and the trees were budding again. A light, steady rain had been falling since the afternoon. The sky was as cloudy as ever, hardly any sunlight could permeate the thick layers of clouds. Down below other students milled about below him in the bleak light of their sunset, shielded from the rain from their own charms; he searched in vain for her among the sea of greens and mud.

A soft *woosh* sound drew his attention, but he did not turn around as his father stepped out from the fireplace.

"Draco."

"Father."

He turned at last and saw his father for the first time since the previous summer.

The strains of the nearing war and his role in it were taking their tolls on him. An excessively handsome man, Lucius Malfoy stood proudly at nearly six feet. His form was

lean and sturdy, his cold, piercing blue eyes and long white hair likened him to the albino peacocks he kept on grounds where he lived. The infamous snake-head cane for which he was known was held imperiously at his side, as always. A ruler without a crown.

Ink black robes accentuated his broad shoulders and chest, drawing attention to his pale face. New age lines had appeared by his eyes and forehead, but knowing his father to be a vain man, Draco said nothing. He recalled the days before Voldemort's return, when his family had been at an almost normal state, when his mother would proudly tell him he had gotten most of his beauty from his father. Though his mother was exquisite as well, Draco reckoned the only things he had inherited from her were his nose and his lips. He himself stood at an impressive six-feet two, slightly taller than his father.

When Voldemort had returned, his family had drawn into itself with fear. His mother's smiles were gone or forced, and his father remained as stony and dark as ever, so unlike the days when Draco had been a toddler, when his father had had a rich, booming laugh and a wide smile; a jovial man who had been exposed to the cruelty and corruption but had not yet succumbed to it.

Lucius took a look around the common room, taking in the half-hearted décor rather indifferently, his lips twitching once he saw the Gryffindor banner Hermione had hung up along the wall.

"You're well," he stated.

"Always, Father."

"Your mother sends her regards. She did not want me to come."

Draco nodded.

"The mission?" Lucius asked.

"Going smoothly. It is planned to take place in a week or two. I haven't worked out the particulars yet."

His father did not reply, only looked around the room as a silence wrapped around them, nodding faintly.

"How is mother?" Draco asked. "Is she recovered?"

Lucius shook his head. Draco's heart sank into his feet, he felt his insides twist.

"The Healers say there is nothing they can do for her," Lucius said quietly. "They've tried everything. We've gone through a number of Healers and Medi-Witches and Wizards, but nothing is working. They say she hasn't got long left, a year, at most. She wants to see you as soon as you've finished here."

Draco sighed, looking away.

"I will get this over with quickly then," he said.

Lucius nodded, looking once more around the room, his eyes lingering on the door that led to Hermione's rooms.

"Remind me who the Head Girl is again?"

You know who it is, Draco thought snidely. *I've told you before.*

"Hermione Granger," he answered.

Lucius toyed with his cane; his eyes locked onto his sons'.

"Ah yes, the know-it-all? The one we discussed in your First Year?"

"Yes, Father."

The head Malfoy looked around. "I'd been hoping to get a glimpse of her."

Aha, Draco thought triumphantly. *This is why he came.*

He had mentioned casually in his last letter after his father's inquiry, that he'd decided to kidnap the Head Girl after completing his mission.

"How is she now?"

"Well."

"Just well?"

"And not here."

"Ah, a pity. I'd wanted to get a peek at my future daughter in law." Lucius sounded pleased. "She has agreed to your plan? I doubt it."

"She doesn't know it yet," Draco said dismissively. "She loathes me but I've made my feelings known to her. I intend to marry her, Father."

"You'll have plenty of trouble if her feelings are not the same," Lucius said. "You would be better off bringing a witch who reciprocates. But if the Dark Lord has approved your plan I will say nothing."

"Good," Draco said. 'I've already had a lecture from Snape. I know the risks. I'll prepare for them.' He looked at his father. "You have no objection to her being born from Muggles?"

He kept his eyes trained on the older man, thinking he had forgotten that fact, expecting him to fly off in a rage. But what happened next he did not expect.

Lucius tutted. "The Dark Lord has changed his stance on blood purity of late. He says it would be a waste to kill anyone with magical blood, Muggleborn or not. He says the true abominations are the Muggles. It is high time we show them who is more powerful, it is time for us to come out of hiding. Why must we hide, if we are stronger? If you like her that much, and if she truly is as special as you've made her out to be, I don't see why I should oppose it. From what I've heard, she would be a valuable addition to our family."

At Draco's expression of surprise, he smiled.

"You expected me to be angry."

"Of course. I hadn't realized things had changed so quickly... I've seen her blood," Draco said. "It is the same as ours. I was shocked to see it."

His father assessed him carefully. "Would you still marry her if you'd never known?"

Draco frowned. "Yes."

The door swung open and the subject of their conversation entered the common room. Head held downwards, she placed her schoolbag on the floor by the coat rack and moved quickly towards her room so quickly that she did not notice them there.

As she walked by, however, his father cleared his throat and Draco called out, "Not going to say hello, Granger?" making her jump. At once she drew her wand, looked up and her eyes widened when she saw who was standing before her.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Draco stepped towards her and she aimed at him, glaring.

"Stay away from me," she hissed.

"Relax, Granger, it's just a little family visit. Join us."

"How did you even get here?" she asked as Lucius stood up, advancing towards her.

"Don't you dare take one step closer!" she warned, backing quickly towards the door. "If you don't leave now I'll tell Dumbledore," she said as she reached for the doorknob but found nothing.

Turning around quickly, she saw it had been removed from the door. She gave the door a push but it would not budge. Bile began to creep up her throat.

"I would like to speak with you before you leave," called out the cold, regal voice of Lucius Malfoy. She saw he was holding the doorknob in his gloved hand.

"How—" she began, but he extracted his wand from the cane and silenced her quickly.

Draco stood by and watched, arms crossed.

"I've forgotten how you little Gryffindors tend to overreact," Lucius remarked loftily as he came to stand before her. "It's merely one of the many reasons I never bothered with them."

Maintaining her icy glare, she still held her wand aloft.

Pointing her own wand at her throat, she ended the spell and said, "I've not forgotten that you're a Death Eater. You *and* your son. Let me out this instant or—"

He'd silenced her again.

Before she could remove the spell he'd summoned her wand from her hand and tucked it into his pocket.

"I promise I am not here to harm you, Ms. Granger. I only came to visit my son and to see the famous Hermione Granger, of whom I heard so much about."

She blushed and narrowed her eyes at him. Lucius chuckled. Waving his hand over his shoulder, he motioned to his son.

"Give us a moment, Draco. I wish to speak to her alone."

Draco frowned but went into his room obediently. His father cast a *Silencio* on the door to prevent him from eavesdropping.

Hermione was rooted to the ground with fear. Was he going to kill her? She tried to edge backward. His hand shot out and gripped her chin, making the witch gasp inaudibly.

Her skin felt smooth and rather hot under his touch. The lightest sheen of perspiration veiled her forehead, her eyes looked a little fevered. He noticed she looked rather peaky, as though she were going to be sick. Lucius retracted his hand calmly. The girl had gone and got herself ill, did Draco know? Tilting her head up, he forced her to look him in the eye, and angled her face this way and that, inspecting her features. She jerked her chin from his hand and moved away. He remained where he stood, clasping his hands behind his back.

"I am well aware of my status as a Death Eater, Ms. Granger. I do not deny it. But I will not have you making false accusations about my son." She looked confused but he chose not to elaborate. Draco would tell her in time.

"I am aware you and my son have had a... difficult past. As his father, I know he is not always a paragon of humility or virtue. I do know he fancies you very much, and perhaps you'll see it is in your best interest to be more patient with him and perhaps your relationship may improve."

She was glaring, still, wanting to tell him exactly why she hated his son, and to point out the fact that their difficult past had turned into a horrible present. Obviously, his cowardly son had not told him of what he had done to her—if he knew, would he still stand there and ask her to be patient with him? The situation was so ridiculous, she wanted to pinch herself and see if it was really happening.

Lucius smiled. She was a fierce one, he could see that plainly. No wonder Draco liked her. The first time he had seen her she had been no higher than his waist, and now here she stood, almost a woman full grown. The change was very becoming on her.

"I can see why my son is so taken with you," he said calmly, and he watched her expression sour. "I hope he will treat you well."

What are you talking about? Her eyes were a little panicked, knowing there was something hugely important he wasn't telling her.

She really did have no idea. Lucius felt a rush of pity for the girl and hoped that somehow her or Draco's heart would soften before the mission was completed. Knowing his son, the event was unlikely. If the girl was as clever as she was reputed to be, he hoped she would find a way to dodge what was coming, or misery was in her future, and he could do nothing to stop it.

"It was good to see you, my dear. I believe I will have the pleasure again," he said, giving her a cryptic smile. He gave her a little bow, stunning her, and took one of her hands, kissed its back lightly before walking away to Draco's door.

"Ah." He turned back to her. "I would recommend not telling anyone about this visit. My son will make sure of it."

He opened the door and summoned Draco, who was rifling through an old volume from his bookshelf. They walked back into the living room, to the fireplace, where the furious Head Girl stood with her hands at her hips.

‘Give me my wand,’ she mouthed, apparently still under Lucius’ Silencio. Draco laughed. Lucius withdrew her wand from his robes and handed it back slowly. The witch snatched it away and pointed it at her throat to end the Silencio, then at them. Draco tensed, ready for a duel but his father merely smiled.

“Put it away, dear girl, and you will not be hurt. Do you honestly think you can win against us?”

“Do you want to find out?” she challenged.

“Put the wand away, Granger,” Draco called, fingering his own just in case. “Put it away and we won’t hurt you.”

He could see her hackles rise as his lingering Imperius took effect. She obeyed, but not before sending them a look of utmost loathing before going into her room and slamming the door behind her.

“She will not be easy to manage,” the elder Malfoy remarked drily.

“It just makes me want her more.”

Lucius clapped his hand over his son’s shoulder. “Be careful, son. Treat her well and perhaps she might soften towards you. Complete your mission and bring honor onto the Malfoy name.”

“I will, Father. Tell Mother I will come home soon.”

Lucius stepped into the green fire and disappeared with another *woosh*. Feeling much better than he had before, Draco shrugged off his jumper, walked over to Granger’s door and tapped on the wood.

“I know you’re there.”

He heard a muffled noise from the other side of the door. She had been eavesdropping, as he had guessed.

“What makes you think I’d ever let you in?” was her shrewd reply.

He rolled his eyes and leaned against the frame. “We’re scheduled to patrol tonight.”

A huff through the door. “I’m not going anywhere with you. *Especially* not the dungeons. Besides, I’m not feeling well. Go with someone else.”

“Not feeling well? What, has a little cold sucked the life out of the know-it-all?”

“Bugger off, Malfoy. I am not going. And it’s not a cold, I’ve got the flu. If you don’t leave now I’ll gladly vomit on you.”

He heard shuffling steps grow fainter as she walked away, most likely to her bed.

He grinned and stayed in his position, leaning against the door.

“I know you’re still there,” she called out angrily. Her voice was muffled through the door. “Leave or I’ll hex you.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say to your beau, is it?” he said with mock outrage.

He heard her walk quickly back to the door, anger apparent in every loud footstep.

"You are *not* my beau."

"Let me in," he ordered.

There was a pause. He knew on the other side of the door, she was struggling against the curse, but it opened anyway and she stood there, hate and resentment clouding her lovely face.

He entered, walked past her pleasantly, as though they were best of friends on a social visit. Granger left her door open and stayed by the door, arms crossed.

"You're in. Now leave." Her voice was scratchy and nearly gone.

"Come on, Granger, it's not like I haven't been in here before," he said smugly. "It's awfully bold of you to order *me* around when you've got nothing to back it up. Remember, sweetheart, *you* are under *my* Imperius."

"I know you have," she said, her voice low and angry. "I want you to never do it again. *Stop* with the pet names. This is not an actual or normal relationship, Malfoy."

"I won't on both account," he said, "because now you'll be coming to my room. Is that better, little bird?"

Granger looked like she was going to be sick. Her face was white and drawn; she looked exhausted and faint. Draco reached for her but she recoiled.

"*Don't* touch me."

Her eyes were wounded, wet with tears. He knew she was thinking of what he had made her do in his bed the other night.

"I want to be *alone*," she hissed, pointing towards the door. "Take a hint! Don't you understand the meaning of the word 'no'?"

He ignored her, choosing instead to sit in her armchair, resting his arms on the rests and leaning back as though he were the owner of the room instead of she, which infuriated her.

"I was hoping that after that lovely night we spent in my room, you would have softened a bit. Apparently, I was wrong," he remarked as she crossed her arms over herself.

"You forced me," she rasped. "You *made* me touch you! It was anything but lovely and I didn't want any part of it!" He thought he saw a glimmer of a tear making its way down her face.

"Fine then, it was enjoyable for only one of us," he smirked. "Lie down on your bed for me, darling. I'll make you cum this time around."

At the same time she began to respond with a curse her stomach heaved so she clapped her hand to her mouth and dashed to her bathroom, making it just in time to the toilet to expel the contents of her stomach rather violently. Spots dotted her vision, she closed her eyes and willed them all away—her head felt too light. Sweat dripped down her forehead and she heaved repeatedly until it was all gone. In her sickness, she had failed to notice the young

man who had knelt behind her and caught her loose, flowing curls in his hands, pulling them to the back of her neck while rubbing soothing circles into her back.

Hermione coughed, spitting into the toilet before flushing it and wiping her mouth weakly, her throat burning.

A glass of water appeared at her side and she sucked it down, forgoing the stray droplets that made their way down her dry lips, past her chin and down the pale skin of her throat, beyond her nightgown.

With hungry eyes he watched those droplets and licked his lips, his hands tightened around her.

The touch startled her and she jumped when she found him still there. She pushed his hands from herself, standing hastily and rinsed out her mouth, brushed her teeth at the sink quickly, before looking down at him, who sat there, watching her silently.

"I would say thank you if you were anybody else," she said. "You don't deserve it. Now leave." She stepped past him, out of the bathroom and to her bed.

Hermione snatched a change of pajamas and hugged it to herself. Malfoy left her bathroom as she pulled the tucked sheets back from the bed. Her head was roaring, she thought she heard her bedroom door close and satisfied, she fled to the loo to change and emerged feeling worse. She locked her door quickly, turned off the light and climbed into her bed, her head pounding. She was raging with a high fever. Laying her head on the blessedly cold pillow, she pulled her blankets around her, shivering. The fire roared to life in the mantle but she hardly noticed.

I could fry an egg on my forehead right now, and yet I'm still freezing, she thought. *I should have stayed in the Gryffindor Tower tonight.*

She fell asleep quickly. Her dreams were fuzzy and didn't make much sense. Everything was too bright, even though the lights were off, the silence was roaring around her. Space distorted when she moved, making her dizzy. Someone was there with her; placing a cold hand on her skin, making soft, comforting noises.

"Harry?" she asked groggily. How had he come in?

The hand was on her lips, quieting her, and she complied. Her throat was dry and it hurt to speak. Her blankets were not warm enough; she shivered violently and her teeth chattered. Her hair was sticking to her face from all the sweat; she was mortified that Harry should be seeing her like this.

The figure at her bed seemed to hesitate before quickly ridding himself of most of his clothing and crawling up onto her bed. He settled beside her, and she feebly shied away. Strong arms reached out and wrapped themselves around her waist, drawing her extremely close so she was tucked into him. Had she been in her right mind, she would have pulled away again, but she was so cold and so delirious she pressed herself closer to him, unaware of his body's response poking into her side. She was still shaking, her teeth threatening to chatter.

Draco looked down at her, his face devoid of expression. Her pale, sweaty face was endearing to him. Though she wasn't exactly pleasant-smelling or looking at the moment, he

was absolutely certain she was still the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Her hands unconsciously made their way to wind around his neck and he leaned closer, holding the back of her head softly, possessively, to his chest. Her breasts pressed against him and he relished the feeling. Her shivering slowly subsided as the warmth from his body bled into hers.

Hermione awoke to the sound of a heartbeat; loud and oddly comforting in her ear. Her stomach would not give her peace; it seemed to be rolling around, twisting with nausea. Her head felt light and extremely woozy, her limbs ached. Licking her lips did no good; her whole mouth was dry as a desert. It was then she realized the heartbeat was still there, and that there were arms holding her to the point of crushing her against a muscled chest. A streak of fear bolted through her and she shifted, opening her eyes to stare into the closed eyes of Draco Malfoy, who she seemed to be embracing around the neck.

If she had had her voice, she would have screamed. But she didn't, and she was too dizzy to do so, the only thing she could do was shove him away from her with all the strength she could muster.

He awoke just before he fell off the edge of the bed, righting himself as the witch ran to the bathroom. He heard the sounds of her being sick again and went to her, pulling her hair back as he had done the night before.

Soon as she was done she pushed him away, rinsing out her mouth once more. Her steps were unsteady and she had to stop several times to clear her foggy mind, but she managed to make her way to her bed, grabbing her wand from its place on her nightstand. He said nothing as she pointed it at him, knowing that thanks to his Imperius she could not harm him.

Grateful that some of her voice had returned, she cleared her throat.

"I told you to leave last night. I *heard* you leave. Why didn't you?"

"I came back. You had a very high fever, Granger. Someone needed to take care of you." His voice was low and still had a slightly strained tone to it.

"You could have taken me to Madam Pomfrey," she snapped. They had shared a bed again! Revulsion took hold of her, and she feared she would be sick again. Her arms wrapped around herself.

"But I didn't," he replied, crossing his arms. The movement drew her eyes to his chest and she blushed, turning so quickly she heard her neck crick.

"Put your clothes back on," she hissed.

He laughed. "No need to be shy, Granger. It's nothing you haven't seen before."

She kept her wand on him as he dressed slowly. Her eyes were cold and desperate, still fogged from her fever and sleep, but he sensed it would be best not to exacerbate her anger further that day. She needed to recover, after all. She slammed the door after he had exited her room and he paused after taking a single step into the common room. It was muffled, but he thought he heard a stifled sob before the sound was cut off abruptly, as if someone had just cast a Silencio around their room.

16. I'm Not Afraid of You

I don't own Harry Potter.

He walked with quiet confidence, with his long arms swinging at his sides, legs kicking out at each step, his cheerful face in a genuine but awkward smile as he ventured out onto the school grounds. The gentle sunlight streaming in through the windows set off the brown tones in his black hair, making the soft, chunky home-knit sweater he sported look merely vibrant and not as garishly colored as it really was.

Having just dropped off Luna at her dorm, he'd decided to take a walk about the lake. He needed some fresh air and hoped that maybe he would find some plinkweed along the shore for his research. He walked out the grand doors and past his schoolmates who called out greetings as he passed by, past the Quidditch pitch and into the meadow that lay nearby. He didn't even have to look where he was going at that point because with his eyes closed he would have known how to get to the lake, he went down there so often. The reflected light off the gleaming waters danced merrily on the shore, the smell and the sound of the rippling waters were a beacon for him.

It wasn't as cold as it had been a fortnight ago; nearly all the snow had melted and though Spring wasn't upon them yet, the cold was gone, replaced by a wonderful breeze that tousled your hair in a playful caress as you walked. Indeed, if he closed his eyes and listened hard, he might just hear the newborn leaves rustling in the winds and the birds singing. The day had been largely overcast, however, and rain seemed inevitable. He would have to hurry, as the sky had darkened rapidly since he had stepped foot outside.

That he now had to rush didn't do much to mar his mood; Neville had enjoyed most of his day and was not about to let some rain bother him so content in his own world, he walked on, slowing his pace even more so as not to trip over any mischievous roots or stray stones. He was closer to the water now; the noise of his classmates was nothing but a faint murmur in the background. Though the lake was a popular location for hanging out, it was rather icy and the water was too frigid still, so it seemed he was alone for now.

Or so he thought.

When he sensed a disturbance in the air, he opened his eyes and looked around once. Twice.

Nothing stuck out at him as he looked around slowly. He took a few steps to his right, where he was positive he had just sensed movement. Could it be Nott? He had jumped out at him from an alcove after Defense Against the Dark Arts, scaring him badly, and Neville had been apprehensive to the thought that Nott might try it again.

He waited for a second or two, holding his breath.

"Hello?" he called out, "Is anyone there?"

His voice echoed slightly around him, startling a small flock of birds out of a tree, but he received no response.

Waiting for a bit more, he strained his ears, listening hard. He was positive there was someone around.

Who could it be?

Maybe they don't want to be found, his mind suggested. *Maybe that's why they're hiding from you.*

He rubbed the back of his neck, thinking.

Better that way, he finally concluded. It didn't make sense to chase after hares if he wasn't hungry.

Tucking his wand back into his pocket, he slowly resumed his quest for the lake, sneaking quick glimpses behind him.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as he looked back, but it was either his mind playing tricks on him or he could have sworn he'd seen something quickly making a path of escape through the tall grass.

Hermione sprinted back into the castle, clutching at a stitch in her side. Her breath came in short, frenzied spurts and her legs ached but she didn't stop running. Lucky for her it was dinner time and most everyone was in the Great Hall. Her footsteps crashed around her, reverberating around the stone walls that caged and protected her. As she found herself plunging deeper into the castle and there was nobody around, she finally let herself slow down until she was walking, still fighting to catch breath.

That morning she had spent the better part of her free period in the library, tucked into her alcove. She had thought about not returning there, especially after what he'd done to her there after the Yule Ball-the memory was stark in her mind and she had spent a good five minutes Scourgifying every inch of that alcove before she even put her things down, until she was satisfied it was clean.

Would that ever wipe the memory away? No, certainly not. But she couldn't bring herself to sit in the other, busier parts of the library where someone might want to talk to her when all she wanted was to be alone. That, and she didn't want to run the risk of Harry and Ron finding her here-they had talked about going to play some Quidditch after lunch, and had invited her. She had been distracted and had halfheartedly said she might be interested, but five minutes later Marcus Flint had walked past her when she had been going to the library, and she overheard him say that Malfoy too had decided to join a few other Slytherins for some Quidditch after lunch. At that revelation, she had decided to largely avoid the Quidditch pitch and hurried on to the library.

Once there, she had wasted an hour trying to work on her most current assignments but found she was struggling to concentrate and thus very little was accomplished. What-or *who*-stole her focus was the very same person who had had it unfortunately from the beginning of the semester up to now.

She was not afraid of Malfoy. She was *not*. She had come back here because he could not ruin her favorite place for her and she would not cower: she intended to reclaim it. His harrassment could not continue to alter her behaviors. Unconsciously, she kept drawing her robe more tightly around herself, her hands bunched in the thick woven fabric. Frustrated, she had tried all her old tricks to help herself narrow her focus but no matter what she tried her thoughts kept slipping back to Malfoy. She kept feeling as though she was being watched and paranoid it was him, she'd glance around, her heart pounding, but never saw anything but rows and rows of bookcases.

A horrid thought had submerged:

Suppose he crept up on her right there and took advantage of her being so far removed from everyone else in the library again?

Try it, and you'll be sorry, she thought, as if he could hear her, but when she reached to grab her wand from her pocket, it was shaking.

The thought had spooked her enough that she had gathered her things quickly and exited the library, and went outside. She had cast the Disillusionment charm over herself and proceeded unimpeded until she had picked a place to sit at random to try and process everything as well as untangle her thoughts, something which she had never struggled with until now.

Why would he even bother? He had humiliated her enough, was that not his goal?

But he had spoken of her as an 'infection'. He had forced an enchanted ring on her. They had slept together on multiple occasions and for most of them, she had been totally unaware. The thought made her want to scrub at her skin until it sloughed off.

She envisioned the ring again, frowning.

He said it made her his. He said she could not have sex with anyone else as long as she wore it.

"I won't be sharing you with anyone else. I don't take kindly to sharing. What's mine is mine."

Her face flushed in anger.

I am not.

But the ring...

A ring doesn't suggest temporary commitment.

"It's a reminder, Granger. So next time you flirt with Potter or anyone else you'll remember who you belong to. You'll always have a reminder of where your place is, and that's with me."

She shoved the memory of his voice away, her skin crawling.

He had said he wanted her because she was clever and he thought she was beautiful. He had said something about dragons hoarding princesses.

It has to be a joke, all of this... He can't be right in the head.

Had he ever been?

She couldn't ever remember seeing this sort of behavior from him before. Not that she had really known him well, but this marked change in behavior didn't just spawn from nowhere, did it?

Certainly, Malfoy was a demon in ways more than one; intent on his want for her. She shivered. He'd tortured her from the get-go, throwing insulting names out at her like sharpened knives until she learned to toughen her skin to them. On many an occasion throughout the previous years, he had sought opportunities to taunt her or remind her of her blood status, or simply hang around her and glare. Draco Malfoy was both a malevolent presence in her mind and in the real world.

In the beginning, it had hurt. This beautiful boy who hated her because of her blood; who only looked at her to criticize, to tease, who thought nothing of her other than the fact that she was a dirty little Mudblood who had no right to be at Hogwarts. She bitterly looked back on the day he had first called her a Mudblood; the tears she had shed. But she had grown, oh how she had grown. Thanks to Harry and Ron, she had learned to not let Malfoy get the best of her. His insults were (almost) nothing to her, she almost always ignored them. She fancied she knew enough about Draco Malfoy to know that he was someone she should not waste her time on. He was a Death Eater's son and lived under Voldemort's nose. He was spoiled and raised in the Dark Arts, he was cruel and conceited and generally unpleasant all the way around. She had always considered him to be a Death Eater, but now according to his father, apparently he wasn't. She wondered if he even wanted to be one.

Why wouldn't he? It would have been expected of him to follow in his father's footsteps. She couldn't see him not becoming one eventually.

Death Eater or not, it doesn't excuse his behavior towards you at all, said a stern voice in her mind.

Frankly, she agreed. He had her under his control, to her distress, and though he did not completely mandate every single one of her actions she could not ask anyone for help or even bring it up if she tried. Every day she severely regretted not having told someone sooner. She had dealt with Cormac quickly, why couldn't she have done the same for Malfoy?

At the very least I could have told Harry, she thought sadly. Then there was the blasted ring and the numerous times he had assaulted her. Each occasion was worse than the last—he'd clearly become bolder after having Imperiused her and was escalating his assaults. She had already seen him mostly nude and he had done things to her she had never done before, and the fact that it was all non-consensual made it ever so much worse. The thought made her eyes water; she hadn't even gotten to that point with Harry and here was Draco sodding Malfoy who thought he could just strut in and pretend he owned her? She felt uncomfortable in her own skin now, like it was not her own. He had taken a sense of safety and privacy from her and she wondered if she would ever get it back. How quickly things changed.

By the time she had reached the Head common room she had regained some modicum of composure and determined to lock herself into her room and try to get some sleep—although that frightened her, too, because what was to stop him from breaking in again to sleep with her? Hermione grit her teeth as she entered her room, raised her wand to put up new wards around her door. Her knowledge of wards was limited but earlier that week she had looked up

some new ones in the library, studied those, and had been using them since but Malfoy's lingering scent that wrapped around her every morning, the soreness about her body from his over eager attentions to it, indicated that he had gotten through those easily, too.

Hermione wiped at her eyes.

Shame. Embarrassment. Fury.

Suppose he'd already raped her in her sleep and she had no idea? Suppose he'd already seen her fully nude, and she, never aware?

She wasn't sure she wanted to know even if he had. She wanted to wrap her robe more tightly around herself. Shroud herself completely within it.

Gods, she hated him.

She finished the wards and stared at her door, full of dread.

Futile. Why even bother?

But what was the alternative? Just give up? An unguarded door was as good as a welcome. And he would have no qualm about coming inside and having his way.

At least now she had the advantage of having the place to herself for a few more hours. Not that it helped her relax any. Hermione let her schoolbag down on the floor, stepped out of her shoes. She didn't know when Malfoy was like to come back, and she had seen him in the Quidditch pitch along with the rest of the Slytherin team. She'd felt doubly glad she'd used the camouflaging charm on herself as she'd sprinted to the castle, hating the fact that she was doing just what he wanted. No part of her wanted to be here but his Imperius was still active and kept her under his control just enough to keep her from exposing him. Whenever she tried, her tongue locked up and she couldn't get a word out, not a single sound until she tried an unrelated topic. She hadn't known the Imperius curse could still be active like that. It frightened her to think that it still had hold of her when he was not around, even now.

Malfoy had been distant these past few days, to her relief. He was almost never in the Head Common Room, and even though there were no complaints coming from her, she knew he was up to something. Whenever she saw him he seemed to have a hard glint of determination in his eye, a tiny quirk to his lip, holding a secret she so desperately wanted to discover. During their patrols together he actually kept his distance, which amazed her. He would walk a few paces behind her, lost in his thoughts, but she could always feel his eyes on her. There had only been two occasions in recent patrols in which he had ordered her to stop and stay still and he had backed her into a wall and snogged her for several minutes while she had stood there like a statue, unable to fight back or even cry as she'd waited for it to end, but it had gone no farther than that, to her great relief. He had let her go both times, a smug smile on his face that she couldn't stand to look at so she'd walked stiffly on ahead, murder on her mind while he lingered behind, sinking back into his dark thoughts.

He had also made no mention of the ring recently, and she wondered if the reason he was away so often had anything to do with him mentioning it needed altering. Was that what he was working on? It couldn't be the only thing keeping him so busy. Harry had been monitoring him here and there and had told her Malfoy spent a lot of time in or around the Room of Requirement. She wondered why. Harry had tried to go and spy on him but was

unable to get into the Room, and Dumbledore kept calling him to his office for meetings and lessons that kept them both occupied quite a bit. Hermione was torn. She would have offered to spy on Malfoy were circumstances different, but being close to him meant bad things for her, so she tried to maintain a distance—until his next order came.

Something he had told her recently, but she had not inquired on, came floating back randomly.

“My parents would have me marry some Pureblood girl I barely know or don’t like. Why bother, when I’ve got the best witch in this whole damned school in my grasp?”

She started with surprise, eyes wide. Had he really said that? How could she not have remembered? She began to shake; her fingers, which had been unbuttoning her jumper, suddenly couldn’t grasp the small objects.

“Besoin d’aide, petite oiseau?”

A shriek ripped itself out of her throat and whirled around, bumping into her dresser at the sight of who was leaning against her door frame. The photo frames on her dresser wobbled precariously. Her heart sank—how had he got through so quietly without her noticing? Wide-open behind him, her door taunted her, as if it had knowingly betrayed her.

Still clad in his Quidditch uniform, Malfoy stared at her, a slight curve to his lips to indicate a smile. The green and silver of his gear made his eyes look even clearer, to an unsettling degree. His hair was tousled and windswept, and he had his arms crossed at his chest as he looked at her.

“Je te previens, laisse-moi tranquille,” she snarled, raising her wand. “Repulso!”

She had put rage into the spell and he must have felt it as its energy careened toward him but he dodged it quickly, his Seeker reflexes warmed by his most recent exercise.

“Careful, Granger,” he said, his voice sly and taunting, “I might start to think you don’t want me in here.”

“Why don’t you hold still then,” she snapped, casting another jinx at him, “so I can give you my warmest welcome?”

She fired a Stupefy at him—he deflected it with his wand and took another step closer. Hermione edged away and almost stumbled over her dresser again. It rattled.

Malfoy straightened as she tottered, smirking.

“If I hold you to that,” he said, “I’m sure you’ll find I’m envisioning a very different sort of welcome than you are.”

“Go to hell!” she snapped on a quick breath that was building up to utter another spell.

He cut her off before she could even begin.

“Don’t move.”

Her body froze against her will.

He appeared swiftly behind her, pocketing her wand before she could force him out. Reaching his arms around her, he undid the buttons of her jumper as she struggled to get away. As he slid the fabric off her arms, he murmured, "I didn't know you could speak French. You can move now as long as you don't try fighting again."

Soon as her arms were free, she stepped as far away from him as she could.

"You don't know anything about me," she said quietly.

He inclined his head. "That may be easily remedied."

"How did you know I was here? You were at the Quidditch Pitch," she accused, eyes narrowing.

Malfoy grinned. "You can't hide from me, Granger." He took a step towards her and she backed away instantly. "Though I commend you for trying."

He took another step.

"Don't," she said in warning.

He advanced again.

"I just wanted to see you," he said simply.

"You saw me last night, didn't you?" she asked angrily. "*How* do you keep getting past the wards on my door?"

"I've been trained rather well by my side, I suppose," he said.

Hermione frowned.

"What else were you trained in?"

"The usual," he said indifferently. "Anything that might give me a leg up over an opponent."

"Since when?" she asked. "When did this training start? Who trained you? Was it your father?"

He raised a brow.

"I wasn't aware you were so curious on my life story."

She glared at him.

"I'm merely trying to make out why and when you became so different from who you used to be."

At that, his gaze softened. He reached up and she flinched. His hand came up to stroke her cheek.

"You only think of me as different because you didn't know me well. People grow, Granger. Whether it's for better or worse is determined later on."

"There is no question that you turned for the worse," she said grimly, turning her head to escape his touch.

"I have the opposite view, Granger," he said. "I realized hiding behind Crabbe and Goyle was getting me nowhere. I wanted to become stronger. I got rid of those two idiots, and I'll leave it to you to decide whether I'm stronger or not."

Her sour expression gave him her unwilling answer.

"Release me and give me my wand, Malfoy," she said in a low voice. "I have more questions."

"I'll answer depending on what your questions are, and as for your wand, absolutely not. You may move again."

At once, Hermione made a grab for her wand anyway but he sidestepped her, ran a hand through his hair, and sat down on the edge of her bed, waiting.

His eyes were cold, but taunting.

"Ask what you will, but if you try that again I'll leave and I'll take your wand with me."

"I don't want to do this in here," she said. "Let's move to the common room."

"Don't test my patience, Granger," Malfoy said, holding up her wand for emphasis as if he intended to break it. "Speak, or I'll leave."

His words didn't please her but seeing as she needed her wand, she acquiesced and walked up to him slowly.

"This is only for verification," she said sternly. "Don't move."

He looked both curious and suspicious but nodded. She stepped beside him and caught his left arm, lifting it to her waist. He caught on and smirked, holding his arm out so she wouldn't have to carry it. Her fingers worked quickly despite their shaking, and soon enough his arm brace was unstrapped and discarded onto the floor and his sleeve was rolled up to the crook of his elbow.

Nothing. His white, snowy skin was untainted, unmarred. Perfect.

He looked at her confused expression, could almost hear the gears turning in her head.

"Surprised?" he asked.

She set his arm down and took one step back.

"I thought your father was lying," she muttered.

He sat up a bit straighter. "What did my father tell you?"

"What I just found out," she replied. Her eyes narrowed. "Why aren't you a Death Eater?"

"Are you disappointed?" he asked.

"Of course not. Loathsome as you are, and despicable as your actions may be, it would have been a thousand times worse were you one. But you not being a Death Eater does not mean I forgive you for the things you've done to me," she said, crossing her arms. "Nor will I ever."

Draco simply leaned back on his elbows on the mattress, watching her.

"I have my reasons for not being a Death Eater," he said, his expression guarded.

"Meaning you won't answer my question," she said flatly.

He laughed. "Basically. Next question."

She placed her hands on her hips. "What was that nonsense you spoke about marriage?"

He laid back on her bed now, his long legs still bent and set on the floor.

"Oh, Granger," he let out a long and rich sigh. "That wasn't nonsense."

Hermione huffed. "Of course it is. I have no plans to marry at the present, or *ever*, if they involve you."

Malfoy snorted and sat up a little to meet her stare, his eyes flashing. "You'd rather marry Potter?"

She took a step back, frowning.

"You asking me questions was never part of the deal."

He sat up straighter slowly. "I wasn't aware we'd struck a deal, dearest."

"You agreed to let me ask questions as long as I didn't try to grab my wand again but you never said you had any of your own, and I won't answer any." She held up a hand as he opened his mouth to speak. "Now leave my room, I've no more questions."

"Not even if I asked you nicely?" he asked, chuckling.

"Just *get out*," she hissed.

"No." He smiled widely. "Sit down."

She froze. Her knees were already buckling. "No."

"*Sit down*, sweetheart. I don't like to repeat myself."

She sat in a chair by her window, still fighting the influence of his Imperius.

His stare was triumphant and cold.

"I'll kill you," she said, her body tense with rage and effort to free herself. "I swear I will."

Draco stood and walked slowly over to her, rolling his sleeve back down. Her eyes were fire, wishing him death with every step.

"The strongest words I've heard from you yet," he said, coming to stop before her, crouching to meet her eye. His hands, large and overheated, were on her knees, his thumbs trailing along the ribs of her knit stockings. "But look at you, sitting at my command."

"I am not afraid of you," she stated. But her lip trembled, and her legs squirmed at his grip. He cupped her chin in his hand and tipped her head up to press their lips together. She went stiff, tried to pull back. He would not let her. His lips were warm and soft but he kissed her roughly, adding more pressure when her mouth parted to pull in air or to protest. He bit her lower lip and she grunted at the brief flash of pain, her heart racing. He finally pulled away, their eyes locked together.

They were breathing heavily. She shook her head, stared up at the ceiling in denial.

"Tell me you love when I sleep with you," he ordered. His hands on her knees had crawled up to her thighs, gently massaging her tensed muscles. She squirmed again, her eyes wide and staring back at him. He felt her resistance in the tension of her body. Her mouth was moving but no words were coming out.

"Do it," he hissed. Her face was so pale.

"I love when you sleep with me," she repeated in a pained gasp.

I hate you, I hate you, her eyes said.

His own told her he didn't care. He was so close she could feel his intake of air.

"Touch me," he murmured.

She bit her tongue, fighting her dread and disgust as her body obeyed his command.

Her hands reached forth. One caressed his jaw, traced along that firm, angular line. The other was in his hair, brushing through it, then moved down to his throat, the connected strong shoulder.

"More," he said, his voice a low rasp. His eyes fluttered shut.

"Please," she said, her voice shaking, "don't make me."

But her hands continued to explore his shoulder, the stiff muscle underneath his Quidditch garb. They dipped down to his chest and something rumbled in his throat like a sigh caught between a moan and a yawn. She felt his pulse briefly, the very heat of him, the honed physique she had often (unwillingly and unwittingly) felt but rarely seen. Her skin crawled.

"I've touched enough of you," he said, his voice a deep, longing rumble in her ear. His hands on her thighs crept higher. "I thought it was time to even it up."

"I don't *want* to touch you! Let me go!"

But her hands hadn't left him. One had spread down to his abdominal muscles, dipping underneath his protective leather chest plate, and the other had latched on to his arm and explored the muscles there.

"You say you don't want me, but you moan and sigh so sweetly when my hands are on you in your sleep," Malfoy growled into her ear. She flinched and her open palms formed into fists.

"It's still not consent, you idiot," she hissed through tears.

"Stop crying."

She did. His hands finally stopped their ascent and left her legs, settled around her throat.

"Kiss me before I go. I want you to mean it."

She obeyed, her lips as hungry and devouring as his this time, and he groaned and pushed her back into her chair, his tongue making way inside her mouth to spread claim. She gagged but only briefly, arching against him as he bit down on her lower lip gently. His mouth

crushed against hers. Her hands clutched around his shoulders, holding him closer. His tongue trailed along her cheek.

He broke away before he lost control of himself, panting. She was too, her eyes closed, her mouth still parted. He licked her bottom lip in one long stroke. She shuddered and he let her go, standing straighter. He recovered his arm brace from the floor.

“Do you enjoy controlling other people?” she asked, her voice dull, rigid with anger. She wiped at her cheek.

“None so much as you, Granger,” he said.

“Find someone else to play this game with,” she snapped. “Find someone who *wants* to play it with you. Why waste the effort on me?”

“Because you make it such fun, little bird,” he said. “And I told you: no one else but you deserves my efforts.”

“You’re delusional,” she seethed. “You’ll never have me.”

Draco stood and walked towards the door, pausing just to say, “Good luck, little bird.”

She was in bed. The illness had taken root inside her; it consumed her as she breathed. Lucius ran a hand over his face and sighed. It was as though she had never been healthy; she was always in bed now. It gradually became more difficult to remember her as she had been before the illness had caught and spread.

They both had known this day would come but had pretended otherwise. How he regretted that now. Would there still be a chance for her if they had taken action sooner? He should have paid attention to the signs.

The fatigue, the diminished appetite, how she could sleep for days. And it wasn’t until after their son had been tasked with the impossible that she had finally been caught off guard by this mysterious ailment and had been in bed ever since.

Narcissa lay in troubled sleep, her fair, aging features smoothed into a likeness of herself in her schoolgirl days. The pale yellow hair he had always loved lay fanned out around her head like a weak halo on the pristine pillow. Lucius shifted in his chair beside her bed, but he never took his eyes off his wife.

Apparently, she had heard the noise, for her eyes opened.

He was crouching beside her in an instant. “I didn’t mean to wake you,” he whispered, his hand reaching for hers.

She grasped it firmly and said nothing for a moment. She stared out the window into the twilight sky and he watched her.

“Where is my son? Where is Draco, Lucius?”

Her voice was quiet, a bit raspy. Lucius squeezed her hand softly.

“He will be home soon,” he told her.

Narcissa did not react the way he'd expected her to. She simply nodded, a satisfied expression on her face.

"Make sure he does," she said, her eyes closing again. He waited for her to speak, but her breathing evened out and she fell asleep again.

He laid her hand back down and sat back down in his seat, and did not move.

"Besoin d'aide, petite oiseau?"— Need help, little bird?

"Je te previens, laissez-moi tranquille,"— I'm warning you, leave me alone.

17. Something Wicked This Way Comes

The end is near.

You know what to do.

Read and review!

Chapter Seventeen: Something Wicked This Way Comes

He looked at his hand resting on his desk with guarded eyes. Though it was still intact and connected to his body, it was useless. The curse had withered his hand like a common weed to a garden flower. Blackened and slightly shriveled, his fingers were grotesquely contorted; forcing him to hide his hand at all times so as not to stir suspicion or worry.

“You’re not listening to me,” came a low voice from the front of his desk.

Adjusting his glasses with his good hand, he looked up at the Potions Professor, who bore an agitated expression on his sallow face.

“Forgive me, Severus. I am an old man, my thoughts seem to run in all directions,” he chuckled.

The other man did not chuckle.

“How can you find amusement when you know what is coming? Have you forgotten that you will be dead in a manner of time?” Severus hissed, placing his cold, spindly hands on the Headmasters’ desk.

“I have not forgotten, Severus, nor do I choose to let that thought consume my every waking thought. I know I will die; it is inevitable. I know that my death will be at the hands of Mister Malfoy rather than yours.” Seeing the other man’s reaction, he continued, “I am aware of the Vow you made to his mother, but something tells me young Draco will be eager to accomplish his mission.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “And you are relying solely on a feeling?”

Dumbledore stood and strolled to the arched window behind his desk, where he kept an assortment of wizard peculiarities.

“Quite. And I have never been wrong, Severus, you know that quite well,” Dumbledore wagged a finger. The Professor fought the urge to roll his eyes, and fought down a wave of unease that threatened to consume him.

The day he had spoken to Hermione after class had been the same day Draco had informed him or his plans for her. Concern for the girl had prompted him to set out for the Headmaster’s office immediately, but that’s where the boy had him. The young Malfoy had forced him to take a Wizard’s Oath, which was not as severe as an Unbreakable Vow, it was still very powerful and had its own form of punishment should he break his oath not to speak of Draco’s plans.

The Headmaster did not seem to notice the other man's rare anxiety. Humming softly to himself, he reached out and absently stroked Fawkes, his brilliantly plumaged Phoenix.

A rustle of fabric told him his visitor was gone.

The Headmaster looked out the window to the sun disappearing behind the mountains and the hills that surpassed the school grounds.

There was a stillness to the air that seeped into one's bones, made them jittery and feel as though they were being watched.

Fawkes turned its head to its master and looked at him from the side of its eye.

A small smile worked up into the old man's face.

"Why, Fawkes," said he, "I believe something wicked is coming to Hogwarts."

Harry's eyes snapped open. His forehead was beaded with sweat. Outside the moon shone, casting a sinister glow to the grounds and the school.

He'd had that dream again-the one on the Astronomy Tower. There were lots of people, lots of voices, but the entire dream had a distorted, fuzzy quality to it; as though he were watching from under water. That didn't prevent the dread that filled him, though.

Tomorrow was the trip with Dumbledore. He'd received a note from the man himself during dinner, instructing him not to tell anyone but Ron and Hermione. The Occlumency lessons he'd been taking from Snape weren't really helping; it didn't help that he was dreadful at it, either. It was humiliating and draining, not being able to stop the foul man from looking through his mind.

He slung his arm over his eyes, erasing the dream from his mind. He would tell Dumbledore tomorrow.

Kicking off his socks, Draco slid into the bed beside the witch, who he had already spelled into a deep slumber. Her deep, steady breathing comforted him as he eased himself next to her, tugging her scarlet blankets over them both. Her dark curls fanned over the pillow and twined around his arms as he grabbed her waist and tucked her into him.

Tomorrow's a big day, he thought, chuckling to himself.

She shuddered in her sleep, as though she knew what he was talking about. She wore a large t-shirt and purple drawstring pyjama pants with tiny blue polka dots. His skin, his heart hummed from their close proximity and the heat from her body, her every breath he could feel brush against him.

He felt the skin on her arms break into gooseflesh and he rubbed it away slowly, enjoying the way she nestled her head into his neck.

He smiled and closed his eyes, placing his hands on her tummy.

I will have you tomorrow, he thought, and drifted into sleep.

A/N: Sorry for the really short chapter. I hate short chapters with every fibre of my being, but I've come to learn they are necessary.

I know the discussion with Snape and Dumbledore wasn't exactly relevant to the book or movie or anything, but I don't really care. I do feel like I could have added something, though. Hmm.

Only around three chapters left! Expect the next chapter soon ;)

Cheers, Charlotte.

(P.S: thanks to everyone who pointed out the French mistake I made in the last chapter! And thank you for the lovely reviews!)

18. The End Part One

Chapter Eighteen: The End Part One

The light inside the glass structure had a greenish tint to it. It lent the space a feel of freshness and paired with the controlled humidity, was all around a refreshing place to be in, if one could tolerate the many strange kinds of plant species and their strange behaviors that were within. There were so many of them the greenhouse was a tangled jungle of green, allowing not much space for students to work, unless asked very nicely.

These magical plants filled the space, sprawling around the tables and the walls. Gardening equipment littered the workspace, making it a requirement that anyone who entered exert extreme caution lest they trip over a pair of shears or get tangled up in a gardening hose.

Luckily, the young man at work inside the curious structure knew his way around by heart. Having worked so many times there, he knew where everything was at all times and, if asked, could rattle off on the magical properties of each and every plant that thrived around him without stuttering or blushing once, he had been known to do when he was younger.

Humming softly to himself, he turned the tap and waited a second or two until the warm water began to flow. He'd been working inside the greenhouse, doing some volunteer work for Professor Sprout, and was just cleaning up to go to lunch.

Drying his hands, he untied his smock and stowed it into his bag as he walked out of the greenhouse. It was a blustery day; the sky was cloudless and grey, the rustling of the branches filled his ears as he walked through the grounds to the castle. His hair blew across his face-he pulled a cap on.

There was a storm coming, he could feel it. The long grass looked soft and thick as a blanket as it bent to the wind. He picked up his pace and changed his direction, but after a few steps he came to a halt.

Sitting there at the base of a tree was Hermione. Neville took in her odd appearance. Her eyes were open and unseeing, staring right at the school, or beyond it. Her hair was loose; the bulk of its heavy mass was draped over one shoulder but random curly strands whipped about her face in the frenzied winds.

"Hermione?" he called. She couldn't hear him through the wind. It seemed she didn't even know he was there. She was deep in thought, which was a very normal occurrence but something in her expression gave him pause.

He reached out and shook her shoulder lightly. She didn't even jump, only looked up slowly to see her worried friend standing above her. She blinked twice.

"What's wrong, Neville?" she asked. Her voice was faint, as close as he was; Neville had to strain his ears to hear her.

"Hermione, there's a storm coming. You should come inside," he warned.

Hermione nodded. "I'd like to stay out here, if just for a minute more." She sounded distant, which unnerved him, because she'd never acted so strangely before.

"I could wait and walk you up to the castle," he offered solemnly. He felt a prickle in his skin. Something was not right.

Hermione shook her head, tucking the errant strands of hair behind her ear.

"Don't worry about me, Neville," she said, "I'll be inside in a few minutes. I just need some time alone."

Seeing him still standing there, uncertain, she gave him a small smile. He noticed that it seemed forced.

"Go on," she told him. "I'd hate to ruin your day."

Urged by some random impulse, Neville bent down and gave her a small, tight hug. She stiffened at first, but then her hands wrapped around his shoulders and she whispered a small 'thank you' into his fuzzy sweater.

"I better see you at dinner, Hermione," he said in a jokingly menacing tone. "'Else Luna and I'll be worried about you."

He gave her a small wave and walked back, glancing over his shoulder to check on the darkening sky and the motionless girl sitting at the tree, staring vacantly at the ancient castle.

Hermione looked down to the small square of parchment she held tightly in her hand. Ron had given it to her during breakfast and they had read it in silence.

Ron, Hermione, it read,

You know who I'm with and what we're out to do. I don't know how long we'll take, but I want you both to keep an eye on things in the castle. Hermione, try to keep an eye on Malfoy if you can. He's been walking around the school late at night and I want to know what he's up to. Ron, see if you can contact the Order and keep them alert and ready in case anything happens. I've left you both the last of the Felix Felicis. Use it well.

Be safe.

—Harry

As soon as they had finished reading the note, Ron had pulled her into a bear hug, telling her everything was going to be ok. She'd nodded and watched as he left for the Owlery, trying to believe his words, but she couldn't. She knew something was going to happen today.

Hermione's blood was running cold. She knew about Malfoy's late night walks; sometimes, deep in her sleep she could hear him walking through the common room and out the portrait hole. Though she had placed newer, more advanced wards and locks on her doors, she knew he had slept with her the previous night. She'd awoken to find (to her horror,) his Slytherin tie knotted around her neck. She'd raced to the bathroom, fighting the vomit that crawled up her throat, and had yanked the slip of fabric off. And she froze, staring at her reflection's neck.

A large purplish-red bite mark marred her skin. Tentatively, she had reached up and ghosted her fingers over it, feeling the crusty dried blood rub off. It was so sore it hurt to even turn her head and she'd almost wished she hadn't taken the tie off. Almost.

No healing spell or glamour charm would disguise it. She ground her teeth, cursing the demented bastard as she rubbed her arms.

She felt dirty, violated, even. To know that he had been in her bed more than once, touching her as she slept made her feel sick. How was she never aware of it when it was happening? How many other times had he done it? Did she even want to know? Her skin crawled. After a quick examination of her body she had gladly concluded that he had not done anything else (but she had noticed some finger-print shaped bruises on her hips, which she promptly healed). She had not seen him at all today, and was quite glad, because she was certain she would have killed him.

He had no right to come into her room much less her *bed*, without any invitation. That he had the nerve and audacity to do this rankled so deep she shook with anger. She hated him. She wanted to tell someone more than ever, but it was if he had placed a tongue-lock jinx on her while she slept, or perhaps it was his Imperius *still* in effect, preventing her from getting help.

The dirty, disgusting cheater...

It would be difficult, and she would be lying to herself to say she wasn't afraid, but she couldn't let him continue to get away with this. She couldn't take it any longer, and hated herself for not having acted at once the first time he had kissed her. If she couldn't get help her only other choice was to face him if she wanted to be rid of him once and for all.

Folding the bit of parchment, she tucked it back into her knitted dress' pocket and adjusted her scarf, making sure it covered the bite. Ginny had gotten them before from her past boyfriends and called them 'love marks'. Hermione refused to call the one she had recieved from Malfoy as such. She had not been conscious, she had not consented, she never had and never would ask for something so... possessive. It felt awful to know he had marked and *claimed* her with this mark and the scar on her arm and even that awful ring like she was some sort of item or bit of land to conquer.

I am not.

If he had not left the mark visible she would never have known. Perhaps he would have gone farther than just groping and kissing. He could have raped her any one of the apparently several times he had crawled into her bed. She was glad he had not. She would *not* let him go that far.

A fat raindrop fell on her cheek, and she looked up, surprised. The sky had darkened, and almost by magic, dark, menacing clouds had rolled onto the scene and were approaching the castle quickly.

"Oh, damn," she moaned, and stood up quickly. Throwing her shoulder bag on, she raced towards the castle as fast as she could just as lightning lit up the school grounds. A loud clap of thunder followed immediately, and she winced as it rang in her head.

She was almost up all the steps leading to the castle doors when she tripped, scraping her knee along the concrete steps. Hissing in pain, she hobbled into the castle and collapsed onto the floor to investigate her wound. Her stockings were torn, and the cut in her knee was only just beginning to bleed. Sighing with relief, she healed it quickly and set off for the Great Hall.

“When am I to grab her?” asked Blaise in a low voice.

Draco looked up from his food and grabbed his goblet, raising it to his lips.

“After this,” he murmured. His companion nodded and resumed eating his apple pie.

They both absently watched the girl who sat two tables away, sitting beside the Weasley siblings, who both looked grave. The Weasley girl was trying to start a conversation, but neither of the Gryffindors seemed to want to participate. Weaselbee seemed preoccupied stuffing anything in reach into his mouth, and Granger was fiddling with her goblet, her eyes roaming around the hall rather miserably.

Draco eyed her scarf, which had been wound around her neck tightly and his lip lifted in a dark smile, the memory of her body in his hands and his mouth on her neck, teeth in her flesh and her pained moan filling his ears. He raised his eyes and found she was giving him a venomous look, a blush staining her cheeks. He winked at her and she looked away, revolted.

He wanted nothing more than to march right to that table, rip that scarf off her neck and fuck her into the table in front of everyone. He wanted Weasley and all the others to watch in horror as he finalized his claim on one of their dearest members. But that could wait, couldn't it? Soon, he'd have her all to himself, and there would be nothing to deter him from getting what he wanted.

He glanced up to the staff table, serious again. The Headmaster wasn't there. Automatically he looked to Granger and Weasley, searching for Potter. He wasn't there either.

Interesting, he thought. But this won't do. Everything is set and everything must happen tonight.

“Come with me,” he muttered to Blaise and swiftly stood up from the table, walking out the door without another word as his friend followed.

Ron and Hermione watched as they left, frowning.

“Are you going to follow them?” Ron asked quietly.

“It's too risky to do it now,” Hermione replied. “Do you have the Map?”

Ron groaned, slapping his hand on the table. “I knew I forgot something. Sorry.”

“Don't fret,” she whispered, “We'll just have to work without it for now.”

He's gone for a drink, read the coin.

It was a simple galleon, but he'd taken a page from Granger's book and had charmed it so he could communicate with Madame Rosemerta, who was under his Imperius. He stuffed it into his pocket, cursing.

What in the blazes did that mean? Surely the old man could have just drunk inside the school?

He placed his hands on his hips, swearing. Blaise stood nearby inside the empty classroom, watching with patient eyes.

"You could always summon him," he offered.

"Yes, and how would that work exactly? Should I send him a nice letter? 'Dear Headmaster, get your saggy arse back to Hogwarts so I can kill you, Regards, Malfoy'. D'you think that would do the trick?"

Frustrated, he kicked a chair, sending it flying to the wall. The sound it made as it collided with the stone wall was extremely satisfying, and he watched as it broke into a large pile of splinters.

"You need to calm down, Draco. You're not thinking straight."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Shut up." He sat down on top of a desk, his elbows on his knees.

"You meant using the Dark Mark when you said summon, didn't you," he stated.

"Correct." Blaise walked towards the door. "You can fire the mark into the sky at the Astronomy tower; they'll be able to see it as far as Hogsmeade, and Dumbledore will come running."

"Right." Draco pulled hissed from his pocket. He pointed to Blaise. "Stay here, get the girl. Make sure to wait until I come to pick her up. *Do not let her escape*. You know how she is, she'll think of a way."

"You can't just grab her on your own?" Blaise asked, a hint of uncertainty in his tone. "I'm sure it'd be easier that way."

"I don't want to risk anything," Draco said impatiently. "She'll be fighting me the whole way. I need both hands free."

Blaise gestured around him to the decrepit classroom. "How am I supposed to keep her here, then?"

"Stun her," Draco said impatiently. "Tie her up. Imperius her. As long as she isn't hurt and you remember she's *mine*."

"Fine." Blaise snapped. "I'm glad to be of help, but when I asked I thought I'd be with you, not down here helping you kidnap Granger."

"Enough," Draco said angrily. "She's just as important as the mission. Secure her and wait for my signal."

Blaise didn't look happy. Draco left the room.

He stalked through the halls, grateful everyone was still in the Great Hall. Up two, three flights of stairs, down another hall, and then up the tower.

It had stopped raining some time ago. The air was close and humid. He stepped out into the wet, cold air, raised his wand, and cast the incantation.

“Morsmordre!”

An enormous green, glowing serpent hung in the air, wrapping itself around a menacing skull slowly. It would take hardly any time for someone to notice it from Hogsmeade, and the Headmaster would come running to protect his pathetic flock.

She was on her way to the Head Common Room. She would change, and then head to the Gryffindor tower to retrieve the Mauraders’ Map and take the Felix Felicis along with Ron, who was waiting for her, so she had to hurry.

“Excuse me, Head Girl?” A soft voice called out from behind her.

Hermione turned around to face a third year girl she vaguely remembered speaking to earlier in the year during one of the Quidditch matches.

“Hello— Cordelia, is it? What can I help you with?” Hermione asked quickly. She needed to get this over with as fast as possible.

The girl, with her large blue eyes fixed on Hermione, simply said, “Someone needs your assistance upstairs.”

Hermione tried not to look dismayed. This would take forever, and Ron was still waiting.

“I’m sorry, but I’m in a bit of a hurry. Perhaps you should call a Prefect? Or your Head of House?”

The girl didn’t blink. “They asked specifically for you.”

Hermione was torn. Perhaps she could race through this and still have time to meet with Ron, and forgo redressing.

“Fine,” she sighed. “Where is this person? And who is it, exactly? Hey!”

Cordelia had already begun walking towards their destination. She was advancing into the next hallway.

How did she get there so quickly? Hermione wondered as she struggled to keep up.

It’s a good thing I don’t have my schoolbag with me, thought Hermione. *I’d never be able to keep up with that thing dragging me down.*

“Cordelia! Where are we going?” Hermione asked, clutching a stitch in her side. The girl kept going faster and faster. If Hermione managed to catch up the girl would put on a burst of speed and leave her several steps behind.

They wound through several corridors in this fashion. Each of Hermione’s questions went unanswered as she followed, growing more and more uneasy.

At last, Cordelia stopped at an open doorway several steps ahead of Hermione, staring blankly at the approaching girl.

“Cordelia, what’s wrong?” Hermione asked, for she had finally noticed the peculiar glassy look in the girls’ eyes. From far away it looked like she was about to cry, but as she neared, she realized the girl had that look for a very different reason.

Just as she stepped in front of the open classroom a pair of arms shot out from the darkness of inside the room and wrapped themselves around Hermione’s waist.

Hermione’s scream was cut off by a dark hand covering her mouth. She quickly clamped her teeth down over the offensive hand and tasted blood. Her captor swore loudly, using words that made her blush, but he did not let her go. She reached for her wand but could not produce it; it wasn’t in her pocket or on the floor.

Kicking and thrashing, Hermione continued screaming against the hands that held her as whoever held her dragged her into the farthest corner of the room. Hermione craned her neck to get a glimpse of her captor. Her eyes widened when she saw his face, when she saw he had his wand pointed at her.

“Stupefy,” muttered Blaise Zabini.

He watched as she sagged in his arms, her frowning eyes closed in slumber.

Lifting her in his arms easily, he laid her down on the only piece of furniture inside the room, the large table by the window.

The door to the wardrobe opened, and a woman clothed entirely in black, a wicked red smile on her lips and crazed, wild eyes and hair stepped out first.

“I am proud of you, Nephew,” she crooned to the young man who offered his hand to help her down.

“Thank you, Aunt Bella,” Draco said.

The rest of the party came in, and assembled before him, awaiting their orders.

“You know what to do,” Draco said. “The Order already knows you’re here. Go hold them off as long as you can. *Do not kill unless necessary.*” This comment was directed at Fenrir Greyback, who had been sniffing the air curiously, a look of longing on his scarred, dirty face.

“Will you be needing any assistance, dear Draco?” asked Bellatrix, holding her wand at the ready.

“Not at the moment, Aunt. Go with the others, I will call you when it is done,” Draco set off for the Astronomy tower once more, listening with relish as the commotion and shouts in the castle grew louder below him.

They landed on the top of the Astronomy tower. Harry tried to support the Headmaster as they stood; staring in horror at the Dark Mark, which still glowed and writhed in the air.

Dumbledore fought to stay upright, panting. There was little time left.

“Harry, go and wake Severus. Tell him what has happened. Speak to no one else, and no matter what happens *do not remove your cloak.*”

Harry opened his mouth to protest. What did the Professor want Snape here for? But before he could express his thoughts the door leading down back into the castle was flung open with a crash.

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry’s limbs locked together, to his immense surprise. Still hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, he fell to the ground.

He heard footsteps approaching himself and Dumbledore, whose own wand had flown out of his good hand.

No No No No No his mind raced, he struggled against the spell to no avail. He realized Dumbledore had used his chance to defend himself to immobilize him.

“Good Evening, Draco,” he heard the Headmaster say. Though he tried to sound normal and polite, Harry could hear the pain behind it.

And at the mention of Malfoy’s name, Harry’s insides began to boil in anger and desperation.

We were right, he thought. *Malfoy was up to something.* He cursed himself for not having taken her more seriously and wished he had begun to investigate Malfoy’s actions earlier, rather than a few days ago.

“Who else is here?” he heard Malfoy ask. Harry tried with all his might to overthrow the freezing spell; focusing as hard as one could under all the thoughts and rage coursing through him. Dumbledore seemed to sense this and applied more pressure on the spell to avoid Harry doing something rash.

He was exhausted, but he didn’t want to give up. He couldn’t. Dumbledore needed his help.

He remembered suddenly he had ordered Ron to keep the Order alert in case anything happened. He prayed to Godric they were here, looking for him and Dumbledore. They needed back up badly.

He also remembered he’d requested Hermione to keep tabs on Malfoy. But she wasn’t here. Had something happened to her? Panic bubbled up in him, and he began to fight his magical restraints again.

Her eyes snapped open, and her breathing quickened as she remembered what had happened.

She tried to sit up, but was harshly yanked back down by her restraints. Looking around, she realized she was lying down, strapped onto a table in the dimly lit room.

Blaise Zabini stood above her, watching her with no expression on his face.

It took her a second to comprehend that she could not speak. She glared at him, hoping he would get the question she wanted answered.

“I suppose you want to know what’s going on?” he asked, dead-panned.

She nodded, twisting in her restraints in the hopes the friction of her skin against the leather would produce sweat, which would lubricate the leather, therefore allowing her wrists to slide through. She’d have to free her stocking-clad feet differently.

A hand pressing down on her stomach made her stop.

“That won’t work, Granger.”

She mouthed something at him—likely an insult, but Blaise ignored it and withdrew his hand.

“There are Death Eaters inside Hogwarts tonight,” he said as he sat down on the table beside her head.

As soon as his hand had left her body she’d resumed her wriggling, but she stopped, staying deathly still as his words reached her.

“Malfoy ordered me to keep you here until he completes his task. As soon as Dumbledore is dead, I will bring you over to him and the rest and he’s going to take you wherever he plans on going.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide and fearful as she took in his news. Blaise looked down at her and felt a rush of pity. She could not have looked more astounded if Draco himself had come into the room to let her go and begged for her forgiveness.

“Don’t be mad at him,” he said. “He wanted you safe and out of harm’s way so he could finish his mission without you and your other boyfriends mucking it up.”

Where was Ron? Was Harry back yet? Gods, Ron might be looking for her at this very moment, and here she was tied down like some sort of wild beast! She had to get out of here. If the Death Eaters were here, then Dumbledore and Harry were on their way, if they hadn’t already returned. *I have to find them.*

But first she had to get out of here.

The only question was, how?

19. The End Part Two

I don't own Harry Potter.

Ron paced around the Gryffindor Common Room, checking his watch every so often, his hand running nervously through his hair. Just after dinner, Hermione had agreed to meet him there in ten minutes. In preparation, he had grabbed the Mauraders' Map, the Felix Felicis potion, and sat down to wait.

And wait.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and he was still waiting.

Merlin's beard, she only said she was going to go change! He thought, frowning.

He ran his hand through his mop of red hair again, kicking at a crumpled up piece of parchment that lay on the carpet. Few students remained in the common room, either finishing up homework assignments or snoozing in the armchairs. Everyone was too distracted and caught up in their own business to take note of the almost frantic Weasley.

It was foolish to think she was still changing out of her clothes. Even *he* wasn't that daft. He couldn't imagine what could be holding her up. Maybe it was Malfoy? What if she'd run into him, and had decided to follow him? Or what if she'd decided to take a quick little detour in the library? It wasn't as if she hadn't done it before.

The fire popped and he jumped, almost tripping over his large feet as he tried to take another step. Blushing, he looked around quickly, making sure no one had seen.

But, he thought, she wouldn't dare do something so stupid when we're supposed to be helping Harry

With Dumbledore and Harry gone, the school was susceptible to an attack. Though he hoped nothing would happen, he had to be prepared for whatever. Something must have happened to her, he realized with dread, and he began to move to the doorway, already grabbing at the map in his pocket.

A loud slam brought his attention to the portrait entrance, where Neville stood, ashen-faced.

"There's Death Eaters inside Hogwarts!" he shouted, clutching his shoulder, where a hex had ripped through the material of his sweater. Ron could see the gash, the blood running down his arm.

The floor seemed to turn into a vat of jelly, his stomach sank to his toes.

The students around him began to panic; two first years began to cry, and the older students looked as though they could not believe what they had just heard. He didn't blame them. He couldn't believe it himself.

“You’re sure?” he rasped.

Neville gestured to his shoulder, eyes wide, breathing heavily.

Right, thought Ron. *Stupid, stupid*, he scolded himself. Neville was shouting something to everyone else but Ron’s mind had gone blank—only one thought broke through.

Where was Hermione?

Withdrawing the map from his pocket he ducked into a corner, unfolded it with shaking hands, and tapped it with his wand.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he whispered, and as the ink appeared, he scanned every inch of the old parchment for Hermione’s name.

It took him a while, seeing as he was in a dark corner. He didn’t dare use Lumos lest someone came and saw what he was holding.

He located her on the sixth floor, by the Astronomy tower. She wasn’t moving, though. Looking closer, he realized she wasn’t alone.

Blaise Zabini, read the small label by his dot. He didn’t like the way his dot was so close to Hermione’s.

Shit.

Stuffing the bottle of Felix Felicis into his pocket, the Map into the other, he strode over to Neville.

“I have to go find Harry and Hermione. I think Hermione’s in danger. You’re in charge, ok? Rally up anyone who wants to fight who is old enough and take them downstairs. Assign a couple of people to take care of the younger students.” He barely made out Neville nodding as he whipped away.

Before he climbed out of the portrait entrance, he shouted over his shoulder, “And get someone to heal your shoulder!”

Unable to move, Hermione watched as Blaise Zabini took her wand from Cordelia.

“Thank you, dear,” he said softly and tucked it into his pocket.

“You’ll forget what you just saw and helped me with. The school isn’t safe just now so run to your Common Room and stay there until it’s safe,” he instructed, and Hermione watched angrily as the Imperiused girl calmly walked out of the room.

Once he had seen Cordelia safely down to the end of the corridor from where he stood, Zabini turned, sitting back down in his chair. From time to time, his eyes would settle on her but for the most part, he looked off into the windows behind her, evidently bored.

Time was slipping by. She *had* to get out there and see what was going on. All these months of Malfoy slipping around in the middle of the night... this was the culmination. It had all happened under her nose! That stung. Had she been braver and not let him harass her

into silence and resort to avoiding him, she might have uncovered his plan sooner. What even was it? She wasn't likely to find out until she got out.

One thing at a time.

Not being able to speak made things difficult. She would have shouted and screamed her head off had she been able to but he had anticipated that. His brooding stare out the window was making it rather hard to catch his attention, too-she was unsuccessful in catching his eye. Her heart pounded.

What was Malfoy doing? What was his plan? Was Harry back yet? Had Ron gone on to meet him, or was he looking for her?

That Malfoy had thought ahead to have her kept in here to prevent her from impeding his mission told her he had been planning this for some time. That scheming, putrid arsehole. She almost felt like crying but forced the tears back.

A fierce burst of impatience took hold of her and Hermione began to wrestle against her binds once more. Wand or not, she would be damned if she didn't try everything she could to get out. She was already too familiar with how badly things could go if one didn't try hard enough.

All her movement finally caught Zabini's attention and his reverie was broken at last-his eyes turned onto her. The corner of his mouth twitched. She gave him a baleful stare.

"Don't give me that look, Granger. It's not as if I volunteered for this. I much rather would have participated in the fight, but *he's* making me *babysit* you, for fuck's sake."

She couldn't think why. She was already disarmed and bound. She was effectively useless. What was Zabini here for? Why did she need to be looked over? Dread clutched at her heart: was Malfoy going to come here when he was done?

Hermione tried slipping her shoe off to make getting out of the bind easier. It took several minutes and she was not secretive about what she was doing in her desperation to leave. At last, with a vicious flick of her ankle, her shoe went flying off and clattered onto the floor. Zabini glanced at it but made no move to stop her. Hermione started on her other shoe. That one came off faster. When it was done she began to wriggle again, carefully shifting her legs in ways and angles that might help them slip from their binds faster.

"I suppose I always knew Malfoy had a thing for you," Zabini said suddenly.

Hermione would have let out an unladylike snort if his silencing spell would have let her.

"Don't look so doubtful, Granger. Ever since he met you he's been complaining about you. 'Granger this' and 'Granger that'! It wasn't until third year after your incident outside the oaf Hagrid's hovel that it really started. And after the Yule ball it got worse. He'd just go on about you for no apparent reason. Everyone else thought it was just because you bested him at everything."

Leaning forward, he planted his elbows on his knees and looked at her more seriously.

"I've known Draco longer than anyone, so I could read him like a book. I could tell he fancied you, even if he didn't know it then. Although—" he tilted his head, watching her, and she squirmed uncomfortably. "It seems more of an obsession than just a crush."

She might believe that, actually. It explained the frequent staring, his possessive attitude, his advances. It made her skin crawl, especially when the brief flash of memory from the assault after the ball surged forward. She shoved it away. She had begun to shake.

"I'm the only one who knows, really," Zabini added with a sense of pride.

Hermione would have rolled her eyes if she hadn't been so stunned by the situation.

It must have been a prank. A long con, to distract her from what he did in secret in the dead of night. He had played his game and she had fallen right into it—now he was reaping his reward, acting out his plan and she had been none the wiser.

Please, tell me it's merely a prank, she thought.

"During meals, in the corridors, whenever you were around, I'd catch him staring at you even though he tried to be subtle about it. And now you both live together and I hardly see him because he's always there waiting for you. And when you got together with Potter, he was *not* happy. He didn't show it much, but I felt it plenty." His voice was becoming distant, a little uncertain as he studied her expression of horror.

"I told him to woo you. He didn't listen to me, did he."

Hermione shut her eyes, her legs still working to free themselves. A shameful blush overtook her face.

Zabini received his answer through that reaction. His eyebrows raised and he raised his wand, ended the *Silencio* he'd placed on her.

"He hasn't ra—"

"No," she said in a violent burst, her face redder than Ron's hair.

"Oh." He sounded relieved.

She was still shaking, breathing hard.

"Has he... tried to?" Zabini asked, looking extremely uncomfortable.

She couldn't answer so she looked away.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't know."

"Why is he keeping me here?" she asked sharply, her voice too loud in the small room. "What is he doing?"

"The Dark Lord ordered him to assassinate Dumbledore," Zabini replied, and her face drained of color. "Draco let Death Eaters into the school. He's going to kill the Headmaster, and then he's going to flee and he's going to take you to Voldemort."

"Why me?" she asked, shaking her head. "Why wouldn't he try to take Harry?"

"Potter belongs to the Dark Lord," Zabini said, standing from his chair. "No one is allowed to touch him. Draco asked the Dark Lord for you as his reward if he completes his mission, and the Dark Lord said yes."

Her eyes were wide, enraged.

"You can't just take people and own them!" she said furiously. "What sort of barbaric behavior is that?"

Zabini shrugged. "You'd be surprised how common it is within the Dark Lord's circle," he said, and her blood ran cold. "Missing persons reports get hushed up a lot because he's got connections within the Ministry."

"What you're telling me is that your *circle* has slaves," she said, feeling faint. "And that's what you're condemning me to by keeping me here."

He looked genuinely sympathetic.

"Granger, if I had a say in any of this, you wouldn't be here. Believe me."

"Then *let me go!*"

He threw his hands into the air.

"*I just told you I can't!*" He calmed himself. "Your best shot is to wait until Malfoy comes and then try to escape."

Hermione wouldn't dare wait another minute. If she was still here when he came back her chances of escape would grow even slimmer. He had tried to rape her before. He might try again, and if his mission proved successful she felt with certainty that he would crown his victory if he found her still bound here. The thought terrified her. She could not wait. What Malfoy had done to her was more than enough already and she didn't want anything else to do with him except for testifying in his future trial before he was sent to Azkaban.

I'll drag him there myself if I have to.

Zabini's exasperated words made her realize she must not have been the only person Draco had threatened. Who would threaten their closest friend? Or was there some other reason? What could it be?

Suddenly she wanted to vomit. Tears of frustration leaked from her eyes despite her efforts to keep holding them back and she turned her head away angrily.

"I'm sorry, Granger," he said. "I mean it... Perhaps it won't be as bad as you think. Sure, Draco's a total knob sometimes but I think he does care about you, otherwise, he wouldn't have me here making sure you're safe. And you won't even have to finish school!" he said. "Think of it, no more exams!"

She nearly laughed at the absurdity of his words. Exams were the least of Hermione's worries. Tears of frustration began to slide down her cheeks.

You haven't seen what he's done to me, she wanted to yell at him. *He doesn't care about anyone but himself.*

"You don't *honestly* believe that," she said bitterly.

"I don't know all his motives or thoughts," he said, "but I know he must care for you if he asked me to keep you safe in here. That's got to prove something, at least."

"*Oh, how noble of him!* He doesn't want his plaything busted before he gets his turn with it!"

“He could be just shy,” Zabini offered weakly, shrugging. “Merlin knows he’s cold enough. I reckon you scare him. Maybe that’s why he went this route, because he didn’t know how to get you to like him.”

This was the most delusional reasoning Hermione had ever heard in her life. Was he seriously trying to excuse Malfoy’s behavior?

“Are you trying to convince yourself he’s not as bad as he is? If he was so shy and scared then he wouldn’t have had the nerve to assault me repeatedly, or do *this*.” She turned her head to show him the injury on her neck.

He stared at it gravely.

“He *bit* you?” His voice was quiet, shaken.

“While I was asleep.” She turned her head again to meet his eye, her own still leaking. “Tell me again he is just misunderstood.”

“Shit.” He passed a hand over his face. He had gone ashen.

“Please let me go, Zabini,” she said, fighting to keep the hysteria from creeping into her voice. “He’ll do worse than this, we both know that. I *can’t* take any more of it.”

“Shit.” He screwed up his face. “Fuck me, I *can’t*, Granger.”

Her heart sank. “Why not?”

“This is part of the plan. He’s counting on you being here. Him and the Dark Lord. If you’re not here I’ll look bad, and who knows what Draco will do to me? I may be his friend but he’s about to walk into a load of power and I can’t hide from any of them if I help you.”

As he spoke she twisted her foot and by some miracle, she was able to slide it through the restraint. Her ankle throbbed with pain but it didn’t matter. Hope flared in her chest.

Yes!

“My side can help you,” she said as calmly as she could though her heartbeat threatened to make her pass out. “Just come with me. We can help you hide.”

He looked so indecisive it almost hurt to look.

“I-I can’t, Granger,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He was sincere but Hermione felt no comfort. He would rather remain in his friend’s good graces than help her. He would leave her here to her eventual rape and kidnapping. Well, Hermione didn’t agree.

By now both her legs were free. She raised them, twisted again, and aimed for a good shove. He finally caught on and tried to dodge but it was too late—her feet caught him right in the chest and with an uttered swear he tumbled backward and into his chair, sending it clattering to the wall. Hermione’s side hurt, the abrupt movement had nearly caused her lower half to fall off the table but she caught herself in time and brought herself up, now fighting wildly to free her arms before Zabini tied her up again.

“Fucking hell, Granger, do you want me to Stun you?” He had risen from the floor and barely dodged Hermione’s feet nearly planting into his face. Just as she reared them in for another attack he sprang forward and caught her ankles in his hands.

NO! she was crying out but no sound came out as her throat was choked with terror.

This was her only chance. He would Stun her if she failed here, and then Malfoy would win.

She twisted from one side to the other, trying to shake him off but he held fast and her arms ached to all hell but she would rather fail all her classes than be restrained again to wait for Malfoy like a new chew toy awaiting the viciously joyous attentions of its new canine owner. Zabini swore loudly again and managed to pin her legs to the table at last.

“Panicking won’t do you any good,” he said. “At least try not to escape until I’m out of the picture so I don’t get into trouble.”

Hermione flushed with rage and tried kicking him again but he blocked her foot with his arm and forced it back down despite her struggles. With his other hand, he drew out his wand.

“It won’t be long now.” He pointed his wand at her. “I’m sorry about this. I truly am.”

Through her terror, she dimly heard a furious yell by the door just as Blaise began uttering the Stupefy, and then he was cut off by something pushing into him and nearly knocking him on top of her. She flinched but he fell short and then was gone. Hermione heard the heavy sound of two bodies crashing to the ground.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” she heard someone shout and that was followed by the sound of a fist connecting with Zabini’s face. She winced as she heard bones crunch and pulled wildly at her restraints.

“Get off of me, Weasley! Expelliarmus!” Zabini shouted, but missed as Ron kicked him in the stomach. He cried out in pain. She couldn’t see from her position on the table but listened with horror (and pride) as her best friend continued to acquaint his fists with Zabini’s flesh.

“Disgusting, pathetic, slime!” Ron roared as he pummeled Zabini, who feebly attempted to reach for his wand.

Ron bolted up off the floor and cried, “Stupefy!”

Zabini, who had lifted himself off the floor and had nearly grabbed his wand, crashed back down. Not even bothering to check if he was still alive, Ron rushed to Hermione.

“Merlin, Hermione, I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner,” he apologized, his voice rushed and shaking.

He raised his wand. “Relashio!” The leather straps disappeared and she sat up faster than lightning, throwing her arms around him.

Ron squeezed her so she could hardly draw any air into her lungs. She was shaking so hard it affected his vision.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“What happened?” he asked.

No answer. Worry gnawed at him.

"He didn't do anything, did he?" He was flooded with relief when he felt her shake her head against his chest.

"H-He has my wand," she said hoarsely.

Quickly, Ron stooped over Zabini, plucked her wand from his pocket, and handed it back to her in one swift move.

He bent down to look her in the eye, quickly scanned her face for any injuries.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"We have to go," she said, shaking her head. "Dumbledore's in danger. We have to go *now*."

Having just remembered about her shoes, she summoned them and put them on before getting off the table. The simple act helped her regain some composure although the adrenaline rushing through her would not let her stop shaking. She shook her head to clear it, trying to get her jumbled thoughts back into order.

Zabini was still out cold on the floor. She almost felt sympathy as she looked at him. Almost.

"Where's Harry? Is he back?" she asked as she levitated her attacker to his chair and conjured several chains to bind him to it, though she felt somewhat sorry to do it. "What's going on outside?"

"Dunno. I was too busy looking for you first. How'd Zabini get you in here?" he asked.

"Imperiused another student and made her lead me here under the pretense that another student was in trouble," she replied.

Ron glowered at Zabini's bloody form. "That foul troll spawn," he muttered angrily.

Hermione touched his arm. "We have to find Harry and Dumbledore. Malfoy will be looking for them."

"How do you know that?"

Hermione looked at Zabini. "He told me. Bring out the map."

They scanned the worn parchment until Ron shouted out and pointed to the Astronomy tower, where three dots labeled Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, and Draco Malfoy were assembled. Hermione's blood turned to ice when she saw Malfoy's name standing in front of Dumbledore's.

"We have to run. Gods," she said. "We might be too late already." She started off for the door but Ron pulled her back.

"We should take the potion now, just in case," he suggested. Hermione nodded and he reached into his pocket for the tiny glass bottle.

"Ouch!"

He withdrew his hand from his pocket as though he'd been burned. His fingers were bleeding.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, impatient.

Wordlessly, and growing paler by the second, Ron reached into his pocket more carefully and withdrew several glistening tiny shards of glass. What was left of the potion had seeped into the fabric of his trousers, creating a dark and shimmering stain.

Hermione's heart sank. Ron swore.

"I must have smashed it when I fell, *shit!* I'm sorry, Hermione, I completely forgot—" Hermione held up a hand to silence him.

"It doesn't matter. Don't blame yourself for it, okay? You saved me before Malfoy came and that's lucky enough. Now we have to go find Harry and rely on our own luck."

Hermione grabbed his hand and led him out the door and quickly through the halls to the Astronomy tower.

It was eerily silent and calm on the sixth floor. Hermione had expected chaos but found none.

"Where is everyone?" she whispered, afraid to speak any louder.

"They're battling in the Great Hall," replied Ron.

She strained her ears as if that might help her hear it.

They broke into a sprint at the exact moment they came into view of the stairs leading up to the tower.

They were almost there.

"Hermione," Ron said.

She wiped at her forehead. "What?"

He wanted to stop for breath but didn't dare—there was an urgency and fear in Hermione's demeanor that frightened him by proxy. She clearly knew what Malfoy was up to, and he would ask about that too, but he had a more pressing question at hand.

"What I don't get is why Malfoy had you tied up in some room," Ron said, clutching at his side as he ran. "Did you try to stop him and he locked you up? Do you think he would have targeted me, too?" He paused to suck in air and they launched themselves up another flight of stairs, their thighs burning. "Is Malfoy going after Harry?"

Hermione finally stopped for breath, sweat dripping down her temples. Her pulse raced.

"Malfoy is going to try to kill Dumbledore," she said. "Zabini says Voldemort won't let anyone go after Harry. Come on, we have to hurry!"

She turned to keep climbing, but Ron's grip on the sleeve of her robe turned her back to face him.

“What about Zabini?” he asked. “Why was he with you?”

She took his arm and dragged him up the stairs and he complied, picking up his pace to match hers, but something was not sitting right in his conscience and Hermione’s behavior was truly worrying.

“Malfoy ordered him to keep me safe.”

Ron frowned. “It looked like he was trying to break your legs, how is *that* keeping you safe? And why would *Malfoy* of all people want to make sure you’re safe?”

She looked so desperately sad suddenly that it tore at him. Her face crumpled as if she might cry. Alarmed, Ron reached out to hug her but she turned away swiftly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t want to talk about it. *I can’t.*”

She rushed up the last of the stairs and advanced into the Astronomy Tower.

At the top of the Astronomy Tower, under the protection of his Invisibility Cloak, Harry Potter stood rigidly, sweating profusely from his efforts to strain against the Petrificus Totalus Dumbledore had placed on him. Harry watched the ongoing confrontation between Malfoy and Dumbledore.

He had thought the worst was over when he and Dumbledore had managed to escape from the Inferi trap in Riddle’s cave. The Horcrux was still tucked into the pocket of his robe, hanging heavy like a boulder that would drag him to the bottom of an ocean.

They had Portkeyed to Hogsmeade and heard about the attack on Hogwarts.

Harry had not wanted to believe it, but the Death Eater’s mark hung in the sky above them, enormous and hideous and green-a color he cared for very little. The Mark cast its sickly glow on everything underneath it-they were drowning in that green.

They had just landed and then heard footsteps coming up the tower-by then they’d already known Death Eaters were attacking within. Harry had braced himself for pain-he had expected Voldemort to appear at the door.

Malfoy had emerged from the stairwell instead, his wand drawn, his face cold and intent.

By then Dumbledore, severely weakened by the cursed water of Riddle’s cave, had already wasted the last reserves of his strength by shoving Harry into the shadows, threw Invisibility Cloak over him, and before Harry could so much as ask why he had frozen him.

And now he could do nothing but watch.

Harry’s mind reeled. Exhaustion gripped him. Rage, too. Lots of it. And disbelief. Malfoy, a murderer? He couldn’t believe it, but the longer he stared at Malfoy, the more he realized how much he had changed. No wonder Hermione hated being around him. Everything about him seemed cold and sharp. More so than usual. He remembered how off his demeanor had seemed during the Yule ball, when he had danced with Hermione. Something about him didn’t seem right anymore-not that it ever really had, but now it filled Harry with an apprehension he had never felt before when considering Malfoy. This realization sank like a

stone within calm waters inside him. When Malfoy had initially come across them, Harry had been prepared for a duel, for a quick end to this. He had dealt with Malfoy the bully for years. In this current situation, Harry didn't know the extent to which the pandemonium in the Great Hall and spreading across Hogwarts lay. He had not realized yet that he had underestimated and largely overlooked Malfoy at a critical point in time in which he had transitioned from a simpering bully into a legitimate threat.

And Hermione had lived in close proximity to him all this time...

Dread crept up his spine. What might he have done to Hermione that she hadn't told him about?

They had all been ignorant. He could curse himself for it. They might as well have handed themselves over to Voldemort. They had no chance of winning, here. He didn't know where Ron and Hermione were. Dumbledore had frozen him and rendered him useless for intervening. He knew he was going to die, and Harry was powerless to stop it.

"Draco, I can help you," the Headmaster said quietly.

He was clearly in pain. The Headmaster could barely stand upright. He was rather ancient, but Draco had seen him standing upright and walking easily through the Great Hall mere days ago, and this sudden change was drastic. He wondered what happened, but only briefly.

Draco scoffed. "You insult me by assuming I need saving."

"I know you are not entirely on the dark side, Draco. I know you do not wish to become a Death Eater. Even if you wish to remain neutral, the Order can hide you and your family. You do not have to do this," Dumbledore added.

Indignation spiked within him. The only thing he wanted from the Order was extremely specific to one of its members.

"You don't know anything. I don't want your help. It's not just that I have to," Draco stated coolly. He raised his wand again, pointed straight to the aged wizard's heart. "I want to."

"Why would you want to kill me, Draco? I have always been aware that you do not like me, but I never thought you capable of something like this."

"Then you haven't been paying attention," Malfoy snapped. "I'm capable of worse."

As much as it annoyed him to realize nobody (except perhaps Granger) had perceived him as a threat until now, he found himself ultimately pleased. Had they recognized his doings earlier, the path to get to this point would have been much more difficult.

I suppose it pays to fly under their noses.

"I had heard rumors that the Dark Lord would try making another attempt on my life. I did not suspect he would attempt it through a student." Dumbledore shook his head ruefully. "I have been much preoccupied this past year."

“All the better for me,” Malfoy replied. “I can’t believe I actually thought it would be challenging to take you down.”

“You have caught me at precisely the best moment for that, it would seem,” Dumbledore said. “I am weakened and have use of one arm. I will take comfort that my condition takes some polish off your victory. Had you attempted this yesterday, you would not crow so loudly now.”

Malfoy laughed. “I’m no Headhunter. The Dark Lord trusted this task to me. He orders, I obey. I collect my reward.”

The Headmaster studied him. One of his eyelids had begun to droop.

“You have been an exemplary student for many years. You are currently Head Boy. What turned the tide?”

“If I do this, I get what I want,” Malfoy said. “It’s as simple as that. This isn’t personal. I don’t feel for you one way or another, but orders are orders.”

“And what is it you want?” asked Dumbledore, just as they heard someone racing up the stairs.

Harry knew who it was, who it had to be. It had to.

Thinking quickly, Draco dashed to the side and out of range from the doorway and kept his wand pressed into the side of the Headmasters’ head.

“Malfoy!” Weasley shouted angrily. “Get away from Dumbledore!”

Draco had always hated the sound of his voice.

Where was Potter?

He glanced around quickly and saw nothing. That didn’t comfort him. He was bound to be nearby. He had a nasty habit of always being in the right place at the right time.

It was then he noticed Granger beside Weasley, pale and visibly shaken, staring at him as if she were determined to not look afraid. They locked eyes, and her fear morphed into hate. It stirred his own anger.

Fucking Blaise. You couldn’t hold her for ten more minutes...

Fine. He still had the upper hand here. He would complete the kill, wrangle his little bird, summon the others and leave the castle.

Doable.

But Granger was a possible splinter in his broom. She was supposed to be *contained*.

She was too clever. Too much of a risk. She might get hurt, or he might have to hurt her to subdue her. He had wanted to avoid that, but it was too late now. His chances of a flawless execution had thinned now that she had managed her escape.

He wanted to swear. Wanted to punish her for skewing his plan. From the look in her eyes, she knew it, too. He saw her reach for her wand.

I don't think so.

Before they could take another step forward, Malfoy whispered "Incarcerous," and Dumbledore was bound head to foot.

"Take one more step, make one move, and I kill him," he growled.

They froze.

"How'd you escape, Granger?" he demanded.

She ignored his question, her eyes fixed on the weakened Headmaster.

"Let him go, Malfoy," she pleaded.

"Where's Potter?" he demanded. "If you lot and Dumbledore are here, then he must be here as well. Where is he?"

The three other occupants of the tower knew full well where Harry was but said nothing.

"I believe, Mister Malfoy, that your mission has nothing to do with Harry. It should not concern you where he is at the moment," said Dumbledore.

"Fair enough," Draco agreed, shrugging one shoulder. He wouldn't waste time trying to get the answer from them, though it would be easy. The Headmaster was his target, not Potter. Still, he kept his guard raised.

"Let him go, Ferret!" Weasley called. Though he didn't dare grab for his wand he stood ready for a physical fight. "The Aurors are on their way. What the fuck d'you think you're doing?"

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Put your wand on the ground."

Weasley opened his mouth to protest. Draco pressed his wand even further into Dumbledore's cheek. Weasley dropped his wand to the floor, glaring.

"Do not harm my students, Draco," the Headmaster said. "Send word to your friends to put down their wands, and I will go with you willingly to Tom Riddle."

"Who's Tom Riddle?" Draco asked, aggravated.

"That is your Master's true name, Draco."

This actually made Draco paused for a moment as he processed the news.

"Yes, well my Master wants you *dead*, he didn't send me to bring you round for tea."

Draco locked eyes with Granger. She tensed, knowing what was coming, and unable to escape it.

"Come to me, Granger."

She flinched, clearly resisting the pull of his Imperius, but his order compelled her feet to act without her consent and within moments she stood before him, her face wavering with hate and fear. Weasley was staring at her, agape.

"You have used an Unforgivable Curse on another student." Dumbledore's voice was harsh with anger and recognition.

"Yes," Draco acknowledged, "and if you speak again or dare move against me I will use another Unforgivable Curse on somebody in this vicinity."

Granger's eyes were mutinous. She was enchanting in her misery.

Let this be a lesson learned for trying to thwart me.

"I've got an idea, Granger," he said. She shut her eyes.

"No, I want you to look at me when I speak to you, sweetheart."

She flinched and opened her eyes reluctantly.

"Excellent. Now tell me what's happened to Blaise."

"He's still in the room, tied to a chair," she said resentfully.

Draco chuckled.

"Well, I suppose if anyone was going to teach him how to tie someone down properly, it had to be you."

She didn't respond.

"I've had an idea, you see," he said. "I guess I've had a little change of heart. Suppose you swap places with the Headmaster, and no murder occurs tonight?"

She went paler still.

"Please, Malfoy," she whispered. "Don't."

"What do you want Hermione for?" Weasley asked angrily.

Malfoy looked down his nose at him. "It's shocking sometimes, how idiotic you are."

Throughout this exchange, Hermione thought quickly.

She didn't even have to think about this, really. Of course she would give her life for Dumbledore. She was planning on it, in a few moments, too. The wizarding world needed them, Dumbledore and Harry. *She* needed them. Whatever it took to keep their best chances at winning the war would far outweigh what she would have to go through if she willingly went to Malfoy.

Would it really, though?

That was the part she was dreading, though. She did not want to give herself to Malfoy. Ever.

He was angry she had escaped, and she knew without a doubt he would seek to humiliate her as punishment.

She and Ron had searched for Harry on the map before entering the tower and knew he was mere feet from them-she wanted to run to him and tear the Cloak off because he *must* be using it, but why he hadn't moved at all she wasn't sure unless he was under orders from Dumbledore. If she even tried to run for him she was sure Malfoy would kill Dumbledore without hesitation.

What must he think of the current exchange between herself and Malfoy? He must have been as confused as Ron surely had been when she had obeyed Malfoy's command.

He had her trapped and he knew it because he knew she would willingly sacrifice herself for Dumbledore.

Bastard.

She looked up and found he was watching her, already knowing her decision.

He kept his eyes trained on the delicious look of loathing in her eyes as she met his gaze.

She hated him, oh, how she hated him. How exhilarating. Draco released the Headmaster only to bind him with ropes and levitate him in the air. The man could barely stand on his own now. Draco positioned him to his right. And then looked expectantly at Granger, who looked so torn it tugged at his heart a little. She clearly had to know Dumbledore was already dying. And that she might be making a fool's bargain. But that she was pushing herself through it anyway on the bald hope that there was still a chance for the Headmaster to recover.

You noble, sweet, naive little bird, he thought affectionately.

"What is your answer?" he asked.

"When hell freezes—" Weasley was cut off by Draco's *Silencio*.

Hermione looked over her shoulder at him to make sure he was alright and to send him a 'please just trust me' look even though she had no current plan on what to do after she agreed to Malfoy's offer.

He looked at her, confused and concerned, but nodded. She turned back to face Malfoy.

"I'll go with you if you promise me you won't harm him," she conceded.

Malfoy's triumphant smirk made her want to peel it off his face with a knife. "I promise."

Harry wholeheartedly agreed with Ron's argument. Dumbledore was weakening by the second, he could tell by how he could feel his concentration on the immobilization spell was loosening. In just a few seconds he would be free and he would save them both.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, "I cannot allow you to do—" He was swiftly silenced by Malfoy.

"I'm glad you've seen reason," Draco said smugly. He couldn't wait to see her face when he went ahead and killed the Headmaster anyway, and have her realize that her show of sacrifice was all for naught.

"I've done what you wanted," she said angrily, "now let him go."

"Let's seal it with a kiss, and then I'll unbind him. Don't you dare even reach for your wand."

She shook her head.

"Malfoy, *please*."

His eyes were so cold.

"Should I just order you to snog me in front of everyone?" he breathed so only she could hear. "Be grateful I haven't yet."

Granger's jaw clenched and she came forward hesitantly, her hands balled into fists. Her face was aflame as she moved to kiss him. He had planned to stay still and let her do all the work, but at the last second his need compelled him to lean down to capture her lips.

A second before their lips touched, there was a yell.

"Repulso!"

Draco felt an invisible blunt force drive into his side and knocked him sideways.

The pain was temporary. It had taken him more by surprise than injured him, though there might be an unsightly bruise along his side come the next day. He came back to his feet instantly, wand still in his hand, wanting to kick himself for having let his guard down so stupidly. Had that been planned? By the look of surprise on Granger's face as she saw Potter come forward, it clearly hadn't been.

She made to put distance between them, to probably rush to Potter.

"Stay where you are," he snarled, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

Potter's face was the angriest Draco had ever seen it.

"There you are, Potter," he said. "I've been wondering why I haven't seen your sorry arse yet. You and that bloody Cloak of yours."

"Let them both go," Potter hissed, his face contorted with rage. Weasley had recovered his wand and stepped closer.

Draco didn't move an inch.

"I don't think so, Potter," he drawled slowly. "You're too late. Granger here has already agreed to come with me in exchange for the safe return of your beloved Headmaster."

Potter glanced at Hermione, his gaze so worried and longing that it made Draco's anger peak.

She's mine.

"Malfoy, let Dumbledore go," Granger said. "You promised."

Draco ignored her, instead looked back at Potter.

"Have you noticed, Potter, that your girlfriend's been acting odd all year?"

Potter's eyes flicked from Granger to him. The lens of his glasses had been cracked badly on the left side.

"What are talking about?"

Draco motioned to Granger. "Tell him what we've been up to."

Potter was so lost. Draco relished it. He looked at his little bird, who looked on the verge of tears.

"We haven't been up to anything!" she was saying. "Harry, please believe me—"

"I snogged her after the ball, did she tell you that, Scarhead? Have you seen those cute red little knickers of hers yet? Did she tell you we share a bed most nights? Has your *girlfriend* told you that?"

Potter had gone pale.

"I don't believe you," he said. But he seemed unsure. And now Draco knew there had been moments-perhaps not doubts-but little clues that might have hinted to him that Granger had hidden something from him, willingly or not.

So you're not as ignorant as I thought you are, Draco thought. But still just enough that I got away with it. Interesting to know, too, that she never told you about any of it.

Potter looked at Granger for an explanation. Tears streamed down her face. Weasley stood awkwardly in the back, his fists clenching and unclenching, anxious and enraged. Draco wondered if he would be stupid enough to try to attack him.

"Tell him the truth," Draco ordered her. "Better yet, Granger, take off that scarf and show him what I did to you last night."

Her hands began to obey his order. She looked like she wanted to disappear. Draco reached up and thumbed away a tear from her eye.

She recoiled. "Don't touch me."

"Don't cry, sweetheart. I know our little secret has been tearing at you. Well, you can finally get it off your chest."

The scarf wound up on the floor. The bite was revealed. Potter stared at it, frowning, but his eyes were wide. Vicious glee washed over Draco.

"Like my handiwork, Potter?" He reached out and put his hand on the witch's shoulder. "I've done more than that, haven't I, Granger?"

"Yes," she said, her voice bleak, breaking. She couldn't shake his hand off. "But *none* of it has been consensual, Harry. He's forced me to—" she broke off and covered her face with her hands.

"Let Hermione go, Malfoy," Potter said. His voice was hoarse, full of rage. "Take that Imperius off her!"

Draco ignored him.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Mudblood,” Draco said with menacing cheer. “This is my fault, but you had plenty of time to go to someone for help before I Imperiused you.”

“I hate you,” she said, shaking her head. “I wish I had.”

Draco reached up to stroke her hair. Forced to stay in place, she strained to keep away from his reach but failed.

“Fortunate for me that you didn’t, little bird, otherwise I wouldn’t have as many fond memories as I do now.” He tipped her chin up. Her eyes were full of venom. “Remember our first kiss? How you fought so hard to get away from me?”

The stupor broke-Potter lunged at him. Emboldened by Potter’s action, Weasley lurched into action as well.

“Stupefy!”

Potter’s hands gripped his robes and he raised a fist, drew it back, sank it viciously into Draco’s face.

It hurt badly, but Draco was too pleased to really care.

“Pathetic, vile ferret,” Potter was snarling, shaking him by the lapels. “You’ve got to Imperius a girl just to get some attention?”

“I already had her attention,” Draco said. “I Imperiused her to keep her pretty little mouth shut. There’s better use for it.”

Potter was rearing to punch him again-Granger was still unable to leave her position but she watched in horror as Draco raised his wand and Stupefied Weasley, who crumpled onto the ground.

“No!”

Potter’s fist connected with his face again. His nose was bleeding heavily. Pain burned at the side of his head. But his plan was working.

He met Granger’s eye as he raised his wand, and winked. She fought against his Imperius fiercely, trying to rush toward them.

“He’s still got his wand, Harry!”

It was too late.

Potter’s fist retreated from his face. He was panting, his glasses almost off his nose, his eyes unfocused.

Draco grinned. Blood trickled from his mouth.

“You should have killed me the moment you were free.”

Potter began to frown.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The night sky was quickly illuminated with a flash of bright green light. Potter flinched, his eyes searing, realizing too late that he had been baited.

Malfoy's extended wand pointed toward the Headmaster. The light from the Unforgivable began to recede, but its damage had been done.

Granger screamed as he fell off the edge of the tower from the force of Malfoy's curse.

Draco grinned up at Potter, who now had an extremely quick decision to make.

"NO!" Potter screamed, and grabbed Madame Rosemerta's broom off of the floor and dove after the Professor's body.

The Tower was suddenly silent.

Draco straightened, slightly dazed, and wiped the blood from his face quickly. Potter's attack was leaving him with a nasty headache and he'd likely have to heal his left eye, which threatened to swell shut, but none of that mattered now. It was time to collect his prize and go.

Granger was sobbing, still frozen in place. She saw him coming and fought against the Imperius even harder, like a rabbit caught in a snare and watching the approach of a hunter.

Draco grabbed her by the arm roughly, pulled her along with him as he exited the Tower.

"Let me go!" she shouted. Her hands clawed at him anywhere she could reach that was not covered by clothing.

They were halfway down the steps when she managed to claw at the recently pummeled flesh of his face. Draco hissed and swore loudly, almost letting her go.

She tried to twist from his grip and run. He wouldn't let her and pulled her close to his face, snarling.

"You nearly cost me my mission, little bird," he said angrily. "You'll pay for that. Incarcerous."

Her hands snapped together, bound by rope. Her feet followed. She would have toppled over had he not caught her, hoisted her over his shoulder.

"No," she said. "Please Malfoy, let me go. I won't go with you."

"You have no say in the matter," he said coldly, starting down another flight of stairs. The sound of the battle was becoming clearer now. "Your fate has already been decided."

She pounded on his back.

"Nobody gets to decide for me!" she quieted, let herself let out a long shaky breath. "You've already won. Rape me here if you must. Just don't take me with you."

Her own words surprised her, but she found herself almost hoping that he would listen and take up her offer, at least set her down so she could fight him in any way she could and keep him in place so he wouldn't escape, because there was no way it was going to end like this. He would certainly try to rape her again, but she would rather it happen here where she still had a chance to fight and escape rather than be taken to Voldemort and have her chances diminish significantly.

They had cleared the stairs and had made it to the fifth floor. Draco set off for the Room of Requirement. Hermione glanced around wildly for any passing person that might be able to

help her. The corridors around them were largely deserted. There was the distant boom of an explosion below them.

"I'm not in the mood for negotiation, Granger," Draco said. "You might as well save your breath."

His long stride carried them to the Room of Requirement quickly.

The door was shut. A Death Eater had been stationed there as a lookout. His face was largely obscured by a silver mask that only spared his mouth. He straightened when he saw Draco approach, his lip curling into a cruel smile as he saw who he boasted over his shoulder.

"Summon the rest," Draco ordered as he entered the room. "It has been done."

"Excellent." The Death Eater pressed on his Dark Mark.

Draco set her down, freeing her feet.

She tried swinging at him with her bound arms. He caught her, forced her to lower them.

"Don't speak, don't move," he instructed her.

Almost immediately the rest of the Death Eaters returned, looking ragged and battle-worn but otherwise smug and triumphant, save for those that had been either captured or killed in the battle.

They loomed around her.

Hermione tried to suppress her trembling, feeling the most vulnerable she had felt yet that night. Malfoy's hand was tight around her arm as if he expected her to try and bolt. Fenrir Greyback looked her up and down, licking his bloody lips, and Bellatrix Lestrange looked at her with utmost loathing. The madwoman held a small, bloodied knife in one hand and her wand in the other; the way she was looking at her Hermione knew she wanted to use the blade on her. On instinct her hand sprang up to cover the mark Malfoy had cut into her arm and tried to back away but Malfoy's Imperius held her in place. The rest of the Death Eaters also wore masks, which she was actually thankful for.

"The Aurors are here," somebody announced. "We need to go."

"It doesn't matter," Malfoy said to the group. "They're too late. Dumbledore is dead."

The group cheered. Bellatrix cackled, clapping her hands in delight.

Hermione had never felt such deep disgust. She looked away.

"And who is this?" a Death Eater asked, coming forward. Hermione felt his scrutinous gaze on her and fought to meet his eye. She didn't recognize him.

"My reward," Malfoy said. "As approved by the Dark Lord."

"If I'd known we were able to bring back prizes, I'd have taken my time coming back up."

Hermione's jaw clenched.

“The Dark Lord specifically stated that only I was able to claim one,” Malfoy snapped. “If you want to complain, go let him know your thoughts.”

The Death Eater did not respond.

Malfoy turned to the rest.

“Go now, quickly, through the cabinet again.”

They hastened to follow his orders.

One by one, they were transported through the cabinet. Hermione watched numbly.

The second the last Death Eater had gone, Malfoy pushed her against the door of the wardrobe and crushed his lips onto hers. She cried out into his mouth.

“*Mine*, at last,” he groaned into her mouth. He freed her arms. His hands crawled over her figure.

She tried pushing him away, but he stuck fast, his hips pinning her to the wardrobe, one arm braced against the door behind her.

“Don’t do this.” She hiccupped as he pulled back for air.

“I own you now,” he breathed into her cheek. “You’re mine, little bird.” He kissed her again, forced his tongue into her mouth and she gagged, feeling around her for something useful.

“You didn’t have to kill him,” she said, breathless. “I would have gone with you willingly!”

Suddenly tender, his hand brushed at her tears. His left eye had swollen shut but the right one stared at her with a frightening affection. She shrank back, reaching behind her.

“You’re too naive for someone so brilliant,” he said, pulling back to cup her cheek in his palm. “Though I shouldn’t complain as it’s worked to my advantage.”

He was leaning in to kiss her again.

Grabbing the first solid, heavy thing she could find, she brought it up and smashed it into the side of his face with all the strength she had left.

She heard his nose crunch and knew he would have bruises and a split lip, but she didn’t care. He shouted out in pain and staggered, clutching at his nose which had begun to bleed again. He reached for his wand when she raised it and hit him again on the crown of his head before he could stop her. And again, harder this time. There was blood on the book now, and her arms ached something terrible, but she couldn’t stop now. She would not stop until he was neutralized, or a chance opened up for her to flee.

“You little bitch!” he shouted, his one good eye narrowed in fury. He lashed out viciously. He was successful, knocking the book out of her hands. Frantic, she grabbed the nearest item (her robe-when had that come off?) and flung it at him, aiming for his head so that it would distract him however briefly.

He swore and fought to untangle the mass of fabric from himself. Hermione scrambled to open the wardrobe and pushed him into the wardrobe as he was managing to fling her robe off, swearing and cursing her.

“Granger!” he roared.

She slammed the wardrobe door shut, barred it from the outside with magic, braced herself against it as he tried to push it open from the inside. He pounded at the door; making it jerk violently and she grit her teeth together to keep from screaming. He stopped abruptly and she almost slid down the length of the wardrobe from her effort to keep it shut. Her heart pounded. Was it over?

No. His voice was coming through the door. She strained to listen, and then went pale. She felt a shifting of magic and knew he had been transported away.

She didn't let up from the wardrobe for a good five minutes afterward, paranoid that he had fainted and was waiting for her to slacken before he pounced again.

Now that he was gone she could grab her wand again. She did so gratefully and without hesitation, set the wardrobe on fire. It took some time but she remained there and made sure nothing else caught flame. If she left the wardrobe as it was she ran the risk of keeping the portal open, and knew beyond a doubt Malfoy would try to come back.

She hadn't realized she'd been crying. Loud, relief-wracked sobs that had to claw their way from her chest. The heat from the fire made her face uncomfortably sticky and tight as it dried her tears.

Once it was done and all that remained was a pile of ashes Hermione ran out of the room and sprinted through the school, out the exit and onto the lawn where she saw a large group assembled.

They were staring down at the body of Albus Dumbledore. Harry was beside the broken corpse, looking as if he was expecting the Headmaster to open his eyes and sit up. Ron was comforting Ginny in the crowd. The students huddled around them didn't dare speak; too transfixed by their horror.

Collapsing onto her knees beside Harry, by the Professor's head, and she stared numbly down at the body of the man whose death she had caused.

The Dark Mark still glowed at the top of the Astronomy Tower. Harry took her hand and held it tight. She didn't have the energy to squeeze back, but she buried her head into his arm.

There was so much to explain. So much to process. All she wanted to do was crawl into a hole and sleep. And forget.

Words, *his* words echoed through her head, and Hermione covered her mouth with her hand to keep her screams from escaping.

'It's your fault he's dead, little bird, Malfoy had hissed through the door. Don't think even for a moment that you've gotten rid of me, because I'll be back for you.'

20. Epilogue

I do not own Harry Potter.

Chapter Twenty: Epilogue

Draco stared unflinchingly into the cold, menacing face of the Dark Lord who sat before him on a grand throne. The other man's red eyes were fixated on himself. There was approval in his dark, unhuman eyes.

Could he even be called a man? Draco wasn't sure. They were alone in the large room, the dark, stone-walled room that his Aunt called her parlor.

The Dark Lord's thin lips twisted to bare his teeth in what Draco supposed was meant to be a smile.

"Ah, Draco," he hissed. "My protégé." Draco felt revulsion at the pride in the snake man's voice, but his face remained expressionless.

"My Lord," he said quietly, bowing.

"You have served me well, my boy. Very well indeed. I knew you would not disappoint me, and I was right. Lord Voldemort is always right," he rasped, looking down imperiously on the young man before him.

"Of course, my Lord," Draco mumbled. *Liar, he thought. You expected me to die in the attempt.*

"You have ridden me of one of my greatest foes, the most annoying and persistent obstacle in my quest for power, and you shall not go unrewarded. There is great potential in you, young Draco," the Dark Lord said, baring his teeth once more.

"Thank you, my Lord."

"I offer you the highest position. You will be my right-hand. You will be able to help myself track down the Potter boy and plot out this approaching war. Whatever you wish shall be at your disposal."

Draco did not flicker an eyelid through the offer. None of it appealed to him-his mind, his very being was set on one thing. Acting out the humble servant, he raised his eyes and carefully yet confidently met those of the Dark Lord.

"I am honored, and I thank you for the offer, my Lord, but I must decline. I'm afraid I only desire one thing and one thing only."

Voldemort seemed only slightly surprised at Malfoy's refusal.

"And what do you desire, Draco? You do not wish to join my ranks and become a Death Eater?"

"No, my Lord. And I want Granger."

“Granger... Potter’s Muddblood friend?”

“The same.”

Voldemort leaned back in his chair, forming his hands into a steeple.

“Ah, yes, I remember your request. I gave you permission to take her, boy, should she not be with you?”

Draco’s jaw clenched. “I’m afraid she got away, my Lord. Weasely and Potter intervened, and she caught me unaware.”

“Yes, I’ve been told the little Muddblood is exceptionally clever. But you must be cleverer if it is your will to capture her, young Draco.” A glint of amusement shone in the Dark Lord’s eye. Draco bristled but kept his tone polite.

“She is the only thing I desire, my Lord. I shall do what you ask of me, but I do not wish to become a Death Eater. If I capture her then we will obtain more knowledge on the Order and Potter. She could be a valuable asset to our side, my Lord.” Draco kept his voice detached and cool, but made sure not to break his eye contact with the other man.

He was not afraid of him, and Voldemort knew it. Draco wasn’t entirely sure if this displeased him or amused him, but he knew it would gain his respect, however.

The Dark Lord considered this appeal for a moment, fingering his wand as he thought.

“Very well, young Draco. You have your wish. Capture Miss Granger. I fear it may take a while, now that Hogwarts security has been heightened and surely she will be very strongly protected over the summer. Your only chance is once she returns for her seventh year. You must find a way to either breach the protection around the school or find a way to lure her here. I leave it up to you.”

Draco bowed again. “Thank you, my Lord.”

He walked out of the room at a brisk pace. Once he was outside, he turned and apparated to outside the gates of the Malfoy manor. He walked right through them, vaguely wondering where his father was, and entered the pristine white mansion. He waved away the House Elf that appeared once he entered and strode through many ornate halls and elegant rooms to find the one he was looking for.

Finding the door at last, he stopped completely, grasping the crystal doorknob gently as he pushed the door open. He silently made his way to the bed, and sat down on the chair beside it.

She lay on her side, facing him with her hands clasped in front of her above the sheets as though in prayer. Her long hair had been tied into a simple braid that fell down her back, over the high collar of her night gown. A light sheen of sweat coated her face, which held a pained expression even in slumber. Her breathing was labored.

His heart ached. How had this happened? He never should have left her in this condition. Guilt flooded through him, weighing him down. Unable to hold back any longer, he reached out and gently took her hands, rubbing his thumbs over her dry skin.

“Mother,” he whispered.

Her eyes flew open at once, settling on him through her sleepy haze. She stared, drinking him in.

“I’ve come home, Mother,” he said, and she smiled.

Draco shut the door quietly behind him, not wanting to wake her again. Frowning, he set off for a different room this time; his own. His thoughts took on a darker path as he made his way through his home.

Hermione had been in his grasp— had she not struck him with that book, she would be here now, begging for mercy underneath him as he thrust into her. He rubbed his cheek, where the bruises and his broken nose had been healed. He would make her pay dearly for that little stint.

Opening his door, he strode into his room and took the object out of his pocket, placing it onto his desk. Her scarf—the very same one he’d tripped her with. He fingered the soft blue material before he walked over to the double French doors that overlooked the grounds.

He could see her clearly in his mind, as though she were in front of him, sitting at her window seat, whistling softly as she knitted a hat. He recalled various images of her: her straining to reach a mug from the top shelf of a cupboard in their little kitchenette, her round, plump bottom demanding his attention. The way she made a little humming noise every time she yawned, how she had a habit of humming to herself as she ran her hands through her hair as she read when she was at the library, the way she had danced with him at the Yule Ball. The feel of her body beneath his, the way her breasts had felt in his hands, the warmth of her lips.

No doubt she’d be tucked away into hiding over the summer with Weasley and pathetic Potter. He smirked, remembering what he’d told him before he’d left. He would have paid dearly to see how she would explain that to him.

He’d have to wait until September to formulate a plan to catch his elusive little bird. It angered him that he would have to wait so long to acquire what was rightfully his, but the Dark Lord was right. It would be near impossible to grab her over the summer.

Plus, the chase gave him something to do. How he loved a good hunt.

Draco grinned. *You can’t escape me forever, little bird.*

This girl—with the deep, beautiful eyes and bright smile; with the skilled hands and wild, flowing hair, with the quiet sensuality and loud innocence was his, and he would make sure of it.

Soon.

Fin.

A/N:
Now there’s the ending. Go ahead, review.

But before you click that review button, I've got news.

There will be a sequel to this. Seeing as I am rubbish at coming up with titles I have decided to stick with "His Persephone," though I send sincere thanks to all those who gave me suggestions.

I haven't a clue how long it will be, but I'm willing to bet it'll be a good deal longer than this one. And it will be dark. Darker than this one, even. It will contain non-con and some violence.

I'll begin updating sometime within the next month, I hope. I'm simply swamped at the moment with school work and I still need to figure out a few important things for HP.

Thank you for all of your kind words. The response I've gotten to this story is far better than I ever hoped it would be, so thank you. Your reviews are the best ever.

For all of you guys saying that this is the best Dramione fanfic you've ever read, I'm truly humbled. I've read far better ones than the ones I'm writing, but just hearing that from you guys makes me want to leap out at you guys from your computer screens and give you bear hugs. But that would be creepy. And against the law or something.

See you soon,

Charlotte